

Miles from Nowhere by kittenCorrosion

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Rock Band, Angst, F/M, Fluff, Mileven, PTSD, Road Trip, also most of the characters are background ones, and language lmao, au is kind of the trend lately so here i go, brenner is still a piece of shit, but it's not JUST mileven so head's up, el can't escape abuse not even in an au, everyone gets a band, it's milevcentric, mature rating mostly for drug use/implied drug abuse, mike has a band, nancy has a band, older teens, the slowest burn

Language: English

Characters: Barbara "Barb" Holland, Callahan (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), James (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Powell (Stranger Things), Steve Harrington, Troy (Stranger Things), Will Byers

Relationships: Dustin Henderson/Max, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler

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Summary:

Mike Wheeler and his friends really just want their band to catch a break so they can hit it big. But the week long road trip to a battle of the bands in the middle of nowhere gets complicated when his sister's rival band shows up, one of his band mates gets tangled in a dark force, and the girl he starts falling for along the way turns out to have a dangerous secret.

A music filled band AU with romance, runaways, and a badass final act.

[dead fic, will not update again sorry]

1. You Can Run Away With Me Anytime You Want

Notes for the Chapter:

hello!

it's been a while, almost three months actually. school kicked my ass, my social life exploded, and i kind of had to take a big step back from writing fanfiction and kind of stranger things in general. my life is still a mess but at least now it's summer and i have time to write again!!

if you hadn't noticed, 97% of my stories are inspired by music or a song, and the idea for this one is no different. i was dying to give mike an excuse to sing a sappy love song and then i was like, well why not put them all in a band. so here we are.

this is definitely going to be focused more so on mike and el, but it's kind of a general story about these characters. i'm not really following the show, but i wanted to stay true to the characters and give them a new adventure here.

i dunno. tell me what you think later.

-g

The AC was blasting on the highest setting, trying to make up for the fact that it was broken and didn't blow out cold air anymore. Mike's breath fogged against the sweaty window as he gazed at the passing fields, the mid-June humidity causing his shaggy black bangs to stick to his forehead. Lucas was muttering a string of profanities from the driver's seat as he attempted to change lanes. The radio droned on, set to one of the only stations that the battered van could pick up.

"And now, the latest hit from America's pop star princess, already number one on the charts... "

"Mike!"

Lucas's voice broke into his thoughts and he looked over at his friend in the driver's seat.

"What, Lucas?"

"Switch the station. I don't want to listen to this garbage while I merge."

Mike rolled his eyes. Just because they were in a band didn't mean they had to be pretentious assholes when it came to popular music. The semi-familiar voice blasted through the speakers, some bubblegum pop hit with a thumping bassline and nonsensical lyrics about a boy at bar and falling in love. It sounded like the rest of her music, catchy and fun and annoying as hell. He reached over and flicked the dial, switching to one of the numerous country stations that covered the Midwest.

"Better?" he asked. Lucas shrugged distractedly, still focused on the rush hour traffic they were dealing with on the interstate.

"Anything is better than Jane Ives. Her music makes my ears bleed..." a tractor trailer changed lanes in front of them, cutting off the van, "SHIT! Watch where you're GOING, asshole!"

Mike gripped the armrest, knowing better than to say anything about Lucas's driving but double checking his seatbelt anyways. Dustin and Will were snoring in the back and Mike shifted in his seat and shrugged indifferently at Lucas's comment about the pop singer, glancing back out the window.

"She has a good voice..."

"Ew, are you seriously defending her?"

He rolled his eyes again, "I'm not defending her, Lucas, I'm just stating a fact," he protested lightly, "if she sang something other than... *that*... I bet you'd like her."

"Fat chance," Lucas snorted.

Mike didn't reply. He didn't care that much, he just didn't like Lucas's attitude about it. But it didn't really matter in the long run. Their

band was nothing like mega-popular Jane Ives, but more of a mix between punk rock and indie alternative, something they could never agree on, despite the fact that they'd been playing together since they were twelve. Seven years and a dozen name changes later, they were still waiting for their big break, mostly playing song covers at bar mitzvahs and retirement home Christmas parties, saving their real sound for Mike's basement and the occasional house party. That was hopefully going to change soon.

"How far away are we now?" he glanced at the calculator-watch on his wrist, "we're supposed to be at the venue in forty-five minutes for set up so we can be on stage by nine." Lucas didn't answer. "Lucas!"

"We've got another half hour..." he finally replied, muttering under his breath, "I think."

"No, you can't think. You have to know. We can't be late to another gig, *especially* not this one, because if we don't make bank tonight then we have to cancel the trip," Mike's voice got louder the more irritated he got, "do you know what I had to *do* to get us this? I had to mention *Nancy*!"

His yelling woke up the two in the back, Dustin sleepily sitting up and yawning while Will just blinked few times and rolled over.

"What about your sister?" Dustin asked, suddenly wide awake, looking eager, "is she going to be there tonight?"

"NO!" Mike threw his hands up in the air, exasperated, "god , when are you going to get over that stupid crush? She already has *two* boyfriends."

"Yeah, well, they're losers..." Dustin muttered back, crossing his arms and almost pouting.

Now Will was awake, shooting Dustin a glare.

"Leave my brother out of it," he shot Mike a glare too, "they're not even dating, that's just a rumor. She's only dating the drummer."

"She was dating Steve before she left," Mike shrugged, already tired of the subject, "I'd heard she'd moved on but it's not like I've talked

to her lately.” He crossed his arms and looked back out the window, ending the conversation.

Lucas stayed silent, wanting to stay out of his friend’s family drama, choosing to press his foot harder onto the gas instead of dealing with his friends’ bickering. He didn’t want to admit that he wasn’t sure how long it would take, choosing to just speed the fuck up and get into Indianapolis as soon as possible. Dustin piped up again.

“So what did you tell them our name was this time, Mike?”

“What do you mean *this* time?”

“You’ve changed it, like, every single time we’ve played.”

“I have not!” he turned in his seat to face Dustin, “I told them what we agreed on last year. Hawkins Middle AV Club.”

There was an eruption of protests from all three of his friends.

“When did we agree on *that*!?”

“That’s too fucking long!”

“Nobody knows where Hawkins is, dude!”

Mike threw his hands up in the air again, frustrated.

“Well that’s what they put on the damn queue tonight, so you’re all just going to have to deal with it!” he crossed his arms and sulked, “and everyone knows where Hawkins is...”

“Not anyone who isn’t from Hawkins!” Lucas shot back, “should’ve just stuck with ‘The AV Club’ like I said.”

“That’s too generic.”

“But it’s clever and nostalgic and easy to remember.”

“Whatever.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, Lucas putting on the speed and getting them there only three minutes late. It was dark by the

time they arrived, the only light coming from flickering street lamps and the neon bar signs. Will looked around at the darkened alleys as they parked, hesitating before finally getting out and helping the others unload the van.

“Jeez, Mike, you didn’t mention it was in the crappiest part of town...” he rubbed his arms, feeling the goosebumps on his skin, “this neighborhood is seriously sketchy.”

Mike was done with the complaints.

“God, fine, you guys book the next one then, I know you’re just dying to go back to playing the Beach Boys for people too old to even hear us!” he grabbed his amp and stomped through the door of the bar, lit up by the glow of the neon sign overhead that read “Mirkwood”. Dustin grinned up at it.

“At least it’s got a cool name.”

Lucas glanced up too. “You would like it. Nerd.”

“What? You’re a nerd too!” he protested as Lucas turned and walked away, “don’t pretend like you haven’t read Lord of the Rings!”

The other boy swatted the air dismissively.

They headed in after their annoyed lead singer and spotted him talking to the owner by the small bit of raised flooring that was apparently the stage. The place was dark, barely lit by weird gothic chandeliers that clashed with the black and white checkered floor. Tables were scattered about, lit by fake candles that flickered light across the mostly empty chairs. There didn’t seem to be a particular theme. The actual bar was to the left of the “stage”, the black counter taking up almost the entire wall, a single flat-screen TV perched above the wall of liquor, the bartender boredly polishing a glass while watching the baseball game that was playing. The place was almost deserted.

“...it picks up more around ten or eleven. But it’s a weeknight, you know,” the owner was explaining to a less-than-ecstatic Mike. He was an unusually tall, middle-aged guy with thick glasses and a habit of

licking his lips. “We can, uh, figure out your pay later. You’re all eighteen right?”

Will, who was at the back of the group, looked down but Mike nodded quickly.

“Yeah, of course, Mr. Callahan,” he assured the older man, “I told you that on the phone.”

“Of course, yeah, I just had to ask. If you need anything I’ll be in the back, but Powell can probably help you,” he gestured to the bartender who glanced over at the motley crew of teenaged boys, still looking bored. With that the older man disappeared through a swinging door that lead to the kitchen, leaving the four boys to set up by themselves.

Mike finally took the time to look around the mostly empty room. There were only three tables with occupants, one a nervous looking couple on a date, another a middle-aged woman sipping a glass of wine and reading a book, and the third a small group of guys talking loudly and munching on greasy wings. An odd variety, he supposed. The bar only had two people, an older guy with a grey beard holding a beer and eating peanuts, parked in front of the TV, and a mess of blonde hair slouched on a bar stool in the darkened corner. Mike squinted, trying to figure out if it was a man or a woman.

“Mike! Pay attention!” He broke his stare and turned back to the others who were almost done setting up.

“Sorry, what?” he blinked.

“I asked what the setlist was. You said mostly eighties covers, right?”

“Yeah, that’s Mr. Callahan said would go over best even though,” he glanced at the meager crowd, “I don’t think any of them really care.”

“So... no Bon Jovi?” Dustin quipped, cracking a smile. Mike let himself snort out a laugh. They didn’t love Bon Jovi.

“Why don’t we start with the Clash song Will likes and then... Inbetween Days, Life on Mars, and uh, then the new original song...” he flinched as all three of them looked at him skeptically, “I know, I

know you guys don't love it yet, but we've got nothing to lose here. Please?"

Lucas and Will exchanged a look and then nodded reluctantly. Mike had slaved over writing that song. It wasn't perfect but he was the only who had any skill in that aspect and if they were ever going to become something other than a cover band, they needed to keep his confidence up. It wasn't a *bad* song, but they hadn't quite captured their sound yet and none of them really *felt* it. Practice would only help.

"Fine," Dustin said with a heavy sigh, "but we're not ending with it, okay?"

Mike's whole face brightened. "Deal!"

He listed off a few more songs that they knew and after going over it ten more times in an attempt to cement it into their minds, Will gave up and wrote them each a copy of the list. Dustin settled at the drums, tapping his drumsticks together like a nervous tic while Will adjusted a few knobs on his keyboard and played the first few chords to warm up. Lucas plucked at his bass before glancing up at Mike and nodding. Mike rubbed the pick between his fingers and tugged on his guitar strap before taking a deep breath.

"Hey, Mirkwood, hope everyone is having a good night so far," the microphone squeaked obnoxiously and the middle-aged woman looked up with a frown before downing the last of her wine and heading out of the bar. Oh well. He licked his lips, "anyways, we're Hawkins Middle AV Club and we hope your night is about to get better."

He mentally punched himself in the face for not thinking of something actually clever, but didn't have time to think about it too much as Dustin tapped them in and he started playing, fingers skidding across his guitar in the familiar patterns he'd memorized so long ago.

The figure at the end of the bar glanced over at the sound of the music and Mike made eye contact with the warm hazel-browns that peeked out of the massive swathes of blonde hair. So it was a girl.

She glanced away quickly, staring back down at the drink in front of her and Mike felt his mouth go dry. He missed the first line of the song.

Lucas elbowed him roughly and he quickly moved towards the microphone, singing out the words as Lucas and Will echoed him.

“Darling you’ve got to let me know,

Should I stay or should I go?

If you say that you are mine

I’ll be here ‘til the end of time.”

The group of guys eating wings gave a hoot and started drunkenly singing along. The older man at the bar looked over his shoulder grumpily but turned back to the game while the couple bobbed along to the music, more focused on each other than their surroundings. Mike’s eyes kept pulling back to the girl in the shadows. She hadn’t looked at them again, more focused on staring into her almost empty glass, but the toe of her pink Chuck was bouncing in time with the beat. He grinned at the sight, not sure why it made him so happy. As they finished, the drunk guys let out an appreciative whoop and they quickly started the next song.

By the end of the third one a few more tables had filled and Mr. Callahan reappeared, passing out appetizers and beers to the new patrons. The Bowie song had a few people singing along and Mike felt pretty good as they moved into his original song. He strummed the opening chords, closing his eyes and pouring himself into the words.

“Walking along the railroad tracks

Summer comes too fast.

Blanket forts and movie nights

Innocence lost.

Promise me you won’t forget

Forget the night we met.”

It wasn't about anyone in particular, the words hastily scribbled across a napkin while out with his friends, but more about a scattering of memories all jumbled together. He'd always been caught on the idea of growing up. That bit of time between childhood and adolescence when anything seemed possible as long as you had your bike and your backpack and your friends. That nostalgia you longed for the rest of your life, finding bits and pieces of it in movies and TV shows that take you back to that time when things were simpler. When you didn't have money but you had time and friends and warm summer nights and that was all you really needed.

Will joined him on the bridge, doing a quiet harmony, and Mike finally let himself open his eyes.

She was staring at him, the mystery girl, chin resting in her hands as she listened to the song. Her eyes caught his and this time she didn't look away. There was something sad about her, but he couldn't figure out what and he quickly glanced around the room to see if anyone else was looking. The rest of the crowd had lost interest, not knowing the song, and when he looked back towards her she had closed her eyes, just listening. His heart sped up.

By the time they finished the song one of the drunk guys yelled, “do some Bon Jovi!”, and Mike didn't have time to think before they were speeding into a spontaneous Journey song to appease their “audience”. The rest of the set passed quickly, the more well known songs getting bigger reactions as the bar filled up a little more. You could barely call it a crowd, it was, after all, a weeknight, but it was enough to encourage the guys, who were smiling by the end of the last song. The whole time Mike couldn't keep his eyes from going back to that girl.

After they finished Mr. Callahan appeared with some water bottles, smiling in approval of their show. He started talking to Mike, but the tall teen distractedly pushed him onto Lucas, glancing over at the bar.

“Hey, can you, uh, negotiate this. I need to go... do something,” he explained brusquely before walking away and leaving a spluttering

Lucas to deal with getting their money. Mike was normally more responsible, but this mystery had intrigued him to a point of willful ignorance.

He dodged through the tables towards the bar, walking towards the emptier end, where the blonde was still sitting in the shadows. Not wanting to be too obvious, he sat a stool away, looking up as Powell, the dark-skinned bartender, meandered over.

“Can I get you something?”

Mike blinked, suddenly unsure. He didn’t really drink, other than the occasional free beer at a house party, but he didn’t want to seem uncool, even though he didn’t have to slightest idea of what to order.

“Uh, yeah. A, uh, a shot of um...” his gaze skittered across the bottles of alcohol on the glass shelves behind the bar and he picked one with big letters, “F-fireball.” *Shit, what is Fireball? Why didn’t I just order a beer?*

Powell raised his eyebrows. “You got an ID?”

He blanched. He was only nineteen and he’d made an unwise gamble on getting a free, unrestricted drink as part of the band. Before he could say anything the girl next to him coughed, sliding her empty glass towards the bartender. Folded underneath of it was the face of Benjamin Franklin. Powell glanced between the two before shrugging and grabbing the glass and money, heading further down the bar before coming back with a shot glass full of amber liquid. Mike tried to keep his mouth from dropping open. Why had she done that? *Does this count as her buying me a drink?* he wondered, glancing at her from the side of his eye.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” Powell intoned before walking away.

Mike stared down at the shot, sweat prickling his spine. There was no way he couldn’t not drink it now, not with her side-eyed gaze watching him, not with her money paying for it. He took a deep breath, grabbed the shot, tipped his head back and poured it down.

The cinnamon flavor was unexpected and he almost gagged. The alcohol burned the whole way down, warming his chest and causing his eyes to water. He coughed before he could help it, slamming the glass down and trying to blink the unsolicited tears back into his eyes before anyone saw him. Soft laughter, quickly smothered, came from beside him and he finally let himself look over at the mysterious girl.

Up close he realized how bedraggled she actually was. Her massive blonde hair looked like it had been styled into large waves at one point, but was now a snarled mess, tangled around her head in more of a rat's nest than a hairstyle. Her eyes were coated with layers of glittery eyeshadow, days-old mascara smudged around around them, making the shadows that stretched beneath them even more obvious. Her yellow dress, which looked more like an oversized long-sleeved t-shirt, was stained with grease and mud and she pulled the hem further down her thighs self-consciously. She had a black leather backpack tucked between her legs, which were covered with knee-high black socks and then her pink high-top Converse. She looked around his age, maybe a year younger, and a total mess, but despite it all Mike was dazzled by how genuinely pretty she was.

"U-Uh," he swallowed quickly, ducking his gaze and trying not to stare, "are you laughing at me?"

"No..." her voice was soft and friendly, but she didn't look at him directly.

"What, you've never seen a guy take a shot before?" he deadpanned, hoping maybe she would crack a smile.

"That was your first time," she stated flatly.

He felt his cheeks redden and blamed the alcohol that had fuzzed his brain, glancing at her from the side again, hands fidgeting with the sticky, empty shot glass. *Stop being such an idiot, Wheeler,* he chastised. With a sigh, he ducked his head.

"Was it that obvious?" he asked sheepishly.

She finally turned and looked him in the face, pouty lips twitching upwards into a knowing smirk as an answer. He groaned and

slumped onto the bar, knowing his ears were probably flaming red too. So much for trying to play it cool. The taste of cinnamon was still stuck in his throat and he involuntarily coughed again. She scooted her water glass towards him.

“Here,” the glass was still full, “I haven’t had any yet.”

He took it gratefully and swallowed the cool water down, glad to get rid of the leftover alcohol taste. He wasn’t sure what to say, desperately grabbing at the shreds of the conversation he had started, glancing over at her array of red-stained glasses.

“So, uh, what have you been drinking?”

She gave him a funny look.

“Shirley Temples,” there was a small pile of cherry stems in front of her, all tied in knots, and she slowly dissected them as she talked, “it’s just Sprite with cherry flavoring. I don’t drink.”

“Oh.” He felt even more stupid now, knowing he had tried to impress a girl who didn’t drink alcohol... by drinking alcohol. “Why not?”

“A drunk driver killed my parents,” she said simply.

It was awkward. He had made it awkward. He gave up his weak attempt to be cool and offered genuine sympathy instead, drawing figures in the perspiration on the water glass in his hands.

“That’s shit. I’m sorry.”

She shrugged, still looking down at the shredded cherry stems in front of her. The conversation was officially dead and Mike felt his heart drop into stomach. Smooth move. He glanced back over at his friends. Lucas was still talking to the owner while Dustin packed up. Will was missing, probably in the bathroom. He tried to decide if it was worth going over and helping or staying and trying one more time. She decided for him.

“I liked your song.”

He whipped back around, not sure he had heard her right.

“You *did* ?” he practically squeaked, then coughed in embarrassment, “I mean, which one? Was it the Bowie? Everyone loves Bowie, you can’t go wrong with—”

“No, I mean *your* song. The original.”

Mike felt his mouth gaping open and quickly shut it. It was the first time literally anyone other than his bandmates or his mother had told him that. He felt himself smiling and tried to hide his grin behind his hand, knowing he sounded too eager.

“Really?”

“Mmhm. Did you write it?” she was looking at him again, blinking softly.

“Y-yah,” he noticed how her brown eyes had hazel centers, soft green dotting the irises. He gulped before sputtering, “um, I mean, yeah. I’m the, um, writer.”

He was afraid he’d come off pretentious or conceited, but she smiled at him, a genuine smile, and he felt his mouth go dry. He took another sip of water, hoping to drown the butterflies that suddenly swarmed his stomach. *Calm down, Wheeler. It’s just a pretty girl.*

“What’s it called?” she asked softly.

“Promise,” he replied, cringing at the weak name, “but, uh, that’s just a... working title.”

She didn’t notice his insecurity, too busy humming softly, and he realized she had picked up the tune, that she was in fact humming *his* song. Her fingers gently beat the rhythm on the side of her glass.

“I like it. The words especially, um,” she paused and then sang the bit of the chorus, “*Promise me you won’t forget, forget the night we met.*”

Mike almost fell off of his stool. If he hadn’t been gaping before, he was now, eyes wide in stunned amazement. Her voice, though she’d sang quietly, was quite possibly one of the most astounding things he’d ever heard, strong and silvery, as soothing as a summer breeze on a sweaty brow.

“Holy shit!” he blurted out and she frowned, startling away from him. He quickly apologized, “sorry, Jesus, sorry, I didn’t mean to be so loud but... your voice is *amazing*.”

She flushed, looking pleased, but also wary. He shook his head, still in shock over how good she’d sounded and glanced back over at Lucas, who looked like he was finishing up, then quickly back to the mystery girl. He had to know her name. He had to give that voice a name.

“By the way, I’m Mike,” he stuck out his hand and she cautiously shook it, “um... can I ask your name?”

For a split second she looked absolutely terrified, but Mike blinked and the terror was gone, replaced with more wariness. She paused and glanced down and he quickly let go of her hand, which he was still holding after their handshake. Her silence stretched and he realized he’d asked too much, opening his mouth to tell her to forget it but she spoke before he could get the words out.

“Eleven,” she glanced at the sticky surface of the bar before meeting his eyes again, “my name is Eleven.”

“Like the number?” he couldn’t hide his surprise and her entire expression shut down at the tone of his voice. *Goddammit, Wheeler.* He tried to recover, smiling brightly at her. “Um, that’s a cool name. Very... unusual.”

“Is it?” she seemed surprised.

“Well, yeah, just a little bit. I don’t know anyone named Seven or Two either...” he shrugged it off, “but, I mean, you could always go by El for short. That’s a more common name.”

She nodded, slowly at first, then earnestly, reaching over to grab his wrist, eyes wide and pleased, another rare smile gracing her lips. The physical contact shocked him and he almost jumped in surprise. She hadn’t made any move towards him during the entire conversation but suddenly she was grabbing him, looking like an eager kid begging for toy. He decided he didn’t mind.

"Yes, El. Call me El," she almost sounded desperate and he awkwardly patted her hand in an attempt to reassure her he would.

"Sure," he smiled, feeling pleased at her reaction, "whatever you want... El."

She smiled even brighter as he repeated the name, looking pleased with herself, and then let go of his wrist, bringing her arms back to cross over her chest. *Who knew making up nickname could get such a reaction?* He thought, hiding another satisfied smile. Maybe she would tell him where she was from, if she was, like, a local or something. If there was a chance he might see her again.

"So... are you heading home after this?" he asked casually, wondering if it was too soon to ask for her phone number.

"No..." her face hardened and she looked down at her clenched fists, choking out the words, her voice suddenly thick with tears, "I-I don't have a home."

Mike blinked, not expecting that answer, but before he could reply and try to figure out exactly what she meant, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Thanks for abandoning me, asshole!" Lucas plopped onto the stool on the other side of him, grinning triumphantly, "but guess who got us two hundred bucks!" he shook Mike's shoulder excitedly, "which is the last bit we needed for gas money. We can actually leave tonight!"

Mike's lack of reaction to the news made Lucas frown. They'd both been stressing over gas money and he wondered what had captured his friend's attention to the point he would forget such an important thing. Looking around the taller boy's shoulder at the girl on the other side, he leaned close to Mike's ear and whispered, "Who's the weirdo?"

Mike shoved him with his shoulder, annoyed at his bandmate's rude demeanor.

"Eleven, this is Lucas," she looked over at the sound of her name, "Lucas, this is Eleven. She said she liked the song I wrote. And she's

got a killer voice.”

Lucas fixated on the abnormal instead of the positives, as usual.

“Eleven? That’s a weird name.”

“Er, she goes by El,” he shoved Lucas’s shoulder more aggressively this time, “and would it kill you to not be a total dick for two seconds?”

Lucas rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to reply but thought better of it, glancing over at the random girl. She looked like she needed to bathe, but she was kinda pretty, he observed, deciding that was the main reason his friend seemed so enamored. Mike didn’t have the reputation of being smooth with women. Especially pretty ones.

Mike, meanwhile, was too busy thinking about the last words she’d said, pondering if there was a way he could help. *She said she doesn’t have a home, is she homeless?* He glanced at her again, noticing how she’d pulled back into herself, shredding the cherry stems quietly. *She bribed the bartender with a hundred dollar bill, there’s no way she’s homeless.* There had to be a reason, a good reason, she didn’t want to go back to wherever she was from, and he got the sense that she was trying to get away from Indianapolis. They were heading out that night, maybe she could tag along for the first few stops? It wasn’t like they didn’t have room in the van. He glanced at Lucas, knowing that his bandmate was going to *hate* it. But then he looked back at El, who was watching him with a quiet desperation he’d seen before. She was going to run, as far away as possible, whether or not Mike decided to offer help.

Bolstering his courage, Mike turned back to her, letting the words vomit out of his mouth before he could think about it too much.

“El, did you wanna come with us?” he could feel his heart pounding and heard Lucas make a weird noise, ignoring it and choosing to explain, “I mean, you said you weren’t going home I was just... we’re heading out tonight, to Springfield, uh, the one in Illinois. And then after that we’re going to Nebraska for this competition...” her eyes had brightened at the mention of travel and he finished his thought,

"I just thought maybe you'd want to catch a ride and sleep in a bed or something."

He didn't get a chance to measure her reaction before Lucas grabbed his shoulder and roughly pulled him away from El. His friend's grip was tight and Mike huffed in annoyance, throwing the hand off of him.

"Mike," Lucas hissed, voice furious, "you better not have just done what I think you did."

"What, do you want me to just leave her in this shady bar?" Mike whispered back, not letting Lucas's enraged glare get to him. "She could get... assaulted or something! She obviously doesn't have anywhere to stay." He lowered his voice further. "I think... I think she's running away from something, the least we could do is give her a ride and a place to crash for the night."

Lucas gave him a skeptical stare, raising an eyebrow expectantly.

"Oh? And just how do you know all that, *Romeo*? Did she confess her life story to you while you seduced her with your awkward inability to talk to women?"

Mike ground his teeth together and resisted the urge to punch his friend in the face.

"No I just... I have this feeling, okay?"

"You have a fuck-ton of feelings, Mike!" Lucas still wasn't taking it. "That's why you write the songs, so you have something constructive to do with all of your goddamn *feelings*!"

"God, Lucas, sometimes you are the biggest fu—"

El could hear them arguing quietly and sighed as she considered her options. Glancing around the dingy bar, she knew she couldn't stay there the rest of the night. She hadn't had a good night's sleep in days, not trusting anyone around her enough to let herself do more than doze. This offered ride seemed like a good idea, a way to get out of the city quickly and without having to provide ID at a bus station or airport. She let her eyes drift over to the boy sitting a stool away.

Mike, she reminded herself. There was something about him, something that made her stomach shiver, something that told her she could trust him. She made her decision.

“Yes.”

The sound of her voice interrupted him and he quickly turned back to face her, pasting a grin over his pissed expression in attempt to not scare her off. He’d missed what she’d said and blinked.

“Sorry, what?”

“Um, I said yes,” she smiled shyly, “I’ll come with you. To... Nebraska.”

Lucas huffed angrily and Mike turned back to him, giving him a look that said, *I dare you to tell her she can’t*. The disgruntled teen turned his head away with a huff of displeasure, saving his words for later. He realized that it was an argument he couldn’t win unless he wanted to tell the clearly down-on-her-luck girl that they’d changed their minds. Not even he was that heartless.

El could sense the tension, glancing between the two with wide eyes. “Is that okay?” she asked.

Mike whipped around again and smiled, feeling like his neck was going to snap if he had to keep going back and forth between the two.

“No, yeah, that’s great!” he exclaimed, genuinely excited.

A bolt of pleasant surprise had passed through his body when she’d said yes and he felt a smile creep across his face. The thought of being able to spend more time with her definitely sounded good, especially if... maybe she’d want to hear more the songs he’d written. Or join their band and sing. Or be his girlfriend. *Now that’s a fantasy....*

“What’s great?” Dustin came up from behind, hopping onto the empty stool between Mike and El, not really noticing the strange girl. “Do we get free beer? That’d be great.”

“Nah, they’ll card you,” Mike replied, annoyed that his friend had got in the way, but deciding it would probably be best to explain the situation while they were there. “But, uh, this is El,” he pointed towards her, “and she’s catching a ride with us, um, tonight.” He didn’t add that she would probably traveling with them the entire time. Dustin’s face lit up with a smile, which he turned toward El, sticking out his hand.

“Hi, El! I’m Dustin!” he grabbed the hand she offered and shook it so vigorously she almost bounced off of her stool, “I’m the friend who never gets asked their opinion about big decisions,” he pointedly jabbed Mike with his elbow, “but it’s cool! I like your shoes and socks! Is that a Shirley Temple? What’s up with your hair?”

He meant well but he wasn’t great at being subtle. El didn’t know how to respond to the onslaught and Mike quickly tried to distract his well-meaning friend from badgering her further.

“Did you guys finish packing everything up?” he looked back over at the stage.

“Nah, we were waiting for you to help us,” the curly-haired drummer smiled merrily, “and now El can help us too!”

The upbeat boy all but dragged the hesitant girl over to where their amps and cables were boxed up and Mike grumpily watched as he happily handed her a box and then led her out the back to where they were parked. Dustin made friends pretty quickly, he had that kind of warm infectious personality, and Mike tried to not let it bother him. It’s not like he had just spent the last half hour trying get a conversation out of this chick and in less than thirty seconds she and Dustin were best friends. It didn’t bother him. At all.

“Easy with the jealousy,” Lucas caught up to him as they reached their stuff, “it’s just the way he is.”

“I’m not jealous, Lucas, god. I just met her,” he slung a cable over his shoulder with a grunt, “there’s nothing for me to be jealous of.”

Lucas gave him a skeptical brow-raise but wisely said nothing, hoisting up the guitar cases instead. Will appeared from the exit,

looking a bit green, and silently joined them, grabbing his keyboard and stand.

“Where’d you go, Will?” Mike asked, but didn’t wait for his youngest friend to reply, wanting to tell him about El, “hey, um, I kind of met this girl and... she needs a ride out of town so she’s coming with us tonight.”

“Oh,” Will looked surprised, “is she from one of the towns we’re stopping in?”

“No, um, I’m not sure where she’s from actually... but her name is El,” Mike tried to casually shrug but behind him Lucas frowned.

All three headed towards the exit where they had parked, having grabbed the last of their stuff. When they got to the van, El was sitting in the open trunk next to their stack of duffle bags, listening as Dustin assaulted her with questions and stories, trying to keep up but looking overwhelmed. Mike hurried his steps, quickly reaching them and setting the cables and amps he was holding down with a *thud*.

“You’re not annoying her, are you, Dustin?” he asked with a look of doubt.

“Nahhh, I was just telling her about Mirkwood and the Silvan elves,” he pointed at the sign still glowing above the door they’d just come out of, “she’s never read or seen Lord of the Rings! Can you believe it?” he turned back to El with a teasing smirk, “you must have terrible friends if they’ve never made you watch LOTR.”

She frowned at his comment, looking at the ground and Mike quickly shouldered Dustin to the side, unsurprised that his uncouth friend had said something wrong. Maybe she did have shitty friends, but he didn’t need to *say* it.

“God, Dustin, shut up,” the voice was Lucas’s and Mike looked over his shoulder, taken aback that’d he’d beaten him to it, “not everyone is as big of a nerd as you. Don’t be an ass.”

Dustin’s face went from smiling to outraged in two seconds. The two started bickering while Will silently finished packing up. Mike led El

to the front of the van.

"Did you want shotgun?" he asked, trying to be the perfect gentleman.

She was too distracted to answer, glancing over her shoulder nervously as something rattled in the alley further down. The second she'd stepped out of the shadows she'd seemed wary, paranoid, like something or someone was watching her. He set a gentle hand on her shoulder, wanting to reassure her.

"You okay, El?"

She tensed under his hand for a second but then forced herself to relax, letting out a shaky breath and glancing around again, clearly still uneasy.

"I'm fine... I'm just tired," she tried to smile, "can we leave now? Please?"

She didn't trust him enough to tell him what was actually bothering her and despite the disappointment that panged in his lungs he acknowledged that he hadn't really earned that yet. He smiled back instead of questioning further, sliding open the van door and helping her get in as an answer to her question. She paused and glanced at him as she buckled her seatbelt.

"Hey, Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Um... thanks."

This smile was much more real and Mike felt his heart do a little dance. He didn't get the chance to reply before Dustin and Will scrambled past him and scooted in next to her, but the genuine gratitude that poured from his eyes made him feel warm. Sure, inviting a strange girl you know almost nothing about to go on a week long road trip with your and your friends after meeting her less than an hour ago probably isn't the best idea. But something about her situation made him feel like he should help, like it was the right thing to do. Mike usually trusted his feelings.

He hopped into the front as Lucas climbed into the driver's seat, starting up the van and putting it in reverse. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a shadow slip out of the alley and stand near the front of the bar. Peering out of the car window, he squinted, but the figure had disappeared and he shrugged it off. What was in the back seat was much more interesting, and he couldn't help but peek over his shoulder at El.

Dustin was attempting to chat her ear off again, but she wasn't really paying attention, her head resting on the window as she started to doze. Clearly she hadn't been lying about feeling tired. He couldn't help but notice that her hair was even more tangled than before and he wondered if she had a hairbrush. He vaguely remembered tossing a comb into his bag while packing and decided she could have it if she needed.

"Earth to Michael Wheeler!" Lucas said with a prod. "Man, you're spacing out again."

"S-Sorry," he realized Dustin and Will were both staring at him expectantly from the backseat, "what were you guys saying?"

"I was telling them that we probably won't get to Springfield until three or four," Lucas explained, his expression going from neutral to annoyed, "and also how you invited a random hobo to come with us to freaking Nebraska."

"She's not a hobo, she's just..." he trailed off, not entirely sure how to explain.

"She's just *what*, Mike?" he reached over and prodded him again, "you don't even know! She could be a wanted criminal or a psychopath or a fucking *murderer* but nope, she's got a cute face so it's a great idea to just invite her along without asking anyone else!"

Mike glared at Lucas, unable to think of a good comeback. It's not like he could prove she was running away, because he didn't know that for a fact. But he wasn't going to admit that she'd had the same look he'd seen on Nancy's face two years earlier. The look of rebellious desperation that had filled her eyes the night before she'd left, all anger and harsh words, disappearing down the road in the

back of her boyfriend's car. He pushed the memories away quickly before glancing back at El, who was, thankfully, passed out and drooling on the window. Cute.

He sighed, "Look, I'm sorry I didn't ask you, any of you, but I just..." he chose his words carefully, "I really think she just needed some help and I would have felt like a total shitbag if I'd let her stay back in that sketchy bar." He paused and risked a glance at his friends. "And also... she sang like two sentences when I was talking to her and holy fucking *shit*, you guys, her voice is... is totally *killer*."

"Really?" Will asked from the back seat while Dustin glanced at her again, looking curiously at the mysterious girl who was causing all of the rage.

"We don't need another singer, Mike," Lucas huffed, determined to be mad for the rest of the drive, "we have *you*. The lead singer. And the second we get to Springfield we're going to try and drop her off somewhere, okay?"

Mike realized that there wasn't any sort of logic he could argue that Lucas would be willing to see at the moment and finally deflated, feeling tired. He *harrumphed* to himself, staring back out the window and avoiding the faces of his bandmates.

"Fine, whatever," he agreed gruffly.

"Good."

After that it was quiet, all of them tired out, and it didn't take long for Dustin's snores to sound from the back seat. The reality that they were actually leaving hadn't set in yet, but Mike felt a few stray excited butterflies tickle his stomach as he pictured himself and his friends on a stage in some place new, finally playing their music and going *somewhere*. He didn't notice the fifth figure in the backseat shift in her sleep.

He let his eyes shut, leaning back against the headrest with a sigh. His song was stuck in his head, but the voice wasn't his. It was soft and gentle, like rushing water and wind chimes.

"Promise me you won't forget

Forget the night we met."

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm committing to this series, just for the record. my goal is to update either weekly or every other week, depending on if i go on vacation or whatever. honestly, i'm not sure how long it's going to be, but i have the first three chapters mostly done at this point (may 30) and i'm scooting along on the fourth as quickly as possible. i'm thinking maybe 20ish chapters but i'm not sure yet. we'll see. what's the rush? haha.

as always comments are aDORED. i'm going to try and get back to replying to ya'll cause i love your input so much! kudos are great too. a little validation never hurt. ;]

see you next week!

2. Hold On Tight and Don't Look Back

Notes for the Chapter:

back again as promised! this chapter is really long, sorry, and i was considering splitting it into two but i kind of liked it all being together. it's a bit on the dull filler-ish side, but it's important to set some things and hey it's got mike and el!bonding. i promise next chapter will be much more exciting.

bad news is that i'm moving to a new house next thursday and so most of this week is going to be working and frantically shoving my life into boxes, which means i won't have as much time to be writing and editing. next chapter might take a little longer than a week.

towards the end there's a song that el sings (no spoilers i promise) called "start of time" by gabrielle aplin and when you reach that spot i would highly recommend listening to it while reading. if you wanna copy and paste the link it is here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8atXQlSfzQ>

that's about it, i hope you like it!

-g

"Mike. Wake up, man, we're here."

Mike felt himself being shaken and let out a disgruntled noise of protest, pushing at the hands on his shoulder. He shifted, turning his head the opposite way, and tried to snuggle back down into the seat.

"S'fine, I'll sleep here," he murmured. There was a sigh and then he jumped as a hand gently smacked him in the face. He sat bolt upright and turned to glare at the culprit, who happened to be Dustin. "Was that really *necessary*?"

"I've been trying to wake you up for like five minutes, dude," Dustin said, unable to hide the grin on his face, "so it was at least a little bit necessary."

Mike just groaned and rubbed at his crusty eyes. They felt sandpaper, the result of being awake so early after only a few hours of sleep. He blinked a bit and looked around, realizing they had in fact stopped, somewhere off the side of a main road in what led to Springfield. It had that vague Midwestern city vibe, with the street they were stopped on being lined with brightly-lit fast-food signs and gas stations, the stop lights flickering yellow to caution the nonexistent, three AM traffic. Lucas had parked in front of a tiny motel called the Midtown Inn. The place looked like it had been picked up in the 1970s and dropped in the present, with mustard yellow walls and fire engine red trim. Its slanted roof and cracked stucco gave him the impression that it might cheap enough for them to actually afford.

With a grunt he got out of the car, spotting the figure of Lucas inside of the main office, talking to the manager, who looked less than thrilled at being woken up so early. Mike started to head in to try and help but Dustin, who had been leaning against the side of the van, caught his arm.

"Where are you going?"

Mike blinked, "Uh, inside?"

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Dustin pointed back with his thumb, towards the inside of the van, and Mike peeked in through the window. *Oh right.*

El was still sleeping in the back, slouched against the window, using her arm as a pillow. Will was in the seat behind her, equally passed out, his hood up around his head. They both looked oddly strained, and Mike made a mental note to ask Will if he was alright. He'd seemed shaken after the gig last night, but Mike had been too busy fighting with Lucas to ask their youngest friend if he was feeling okay. He let his gaze fall back on El.

“What about her?” he asked.

“Lucas said you should wake her up, since she’s your problem,” Dustin said, sounding apologetic to have to relay the message, “he, uh, said some other things but I think that was the main idea.”

Mike rolled his eyes, seriously sick of Lucas’s attitude. So far she hadn’t even been a problem, and he wished he would just give the girl a chance. Maybe if he could get her to sing for them...

“Yeah, okay, I’ll wake her up. Hang on a second.”

He opened up the door gently, not wanting to scare her or Will awake and sat on the edge of the seat, trying not to get too close. This was weird. He’d never had to wake up a girl before, or at least not one that wasn’t his sister. He paused.

“I could just carry her in, if you want,” Dustin offered helpfully.

Mike shook his head. “No, no it’s fine. I got it.”

He reached out with a tentative hand, gently shaking her shoulder, trying not to knock her head against the window. She groaned and shifted, brushing at the hair that was stuck in her mouth.

“Nnnmmph... not yet, Papa,” she mumbled softly, tucking her head back under arm.

“Uh,” he wasn’t sure what she meant, but he gave her another shake, deciding to worry about it later, “El, it’s Mike. We’re here at the motel.”

She sat up so suddenly her hair whipped him in the face and he choked on a mouthful of it as he lunged backward, falling off the seat and onto the floor of the car. “Ow.”

“I’m sorry!” she squeaked, face turning pink.

He slowly pushed himself up, taking in her embarrassed face and waving off her concern. “It’s fine, I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

He ended up just crawling out of the car so she could get out, but

noticed that Will was still conked out. *How did he sleep through that?* Mike wondered, crawling back into the van to awaken the passed out teen. He glanced back at El, who was standing huddled against the van, and then back at Will.

"Will," he leaned over and tugged his friend's hoodie, "hey, get up buddy, we're here."

Will still hadn't stirred and Mike felt a pang of worry, shaking him even harder, roughly, until suddenly the younger boy's eyes flew open and he scurried away like a panicked animal. When he realized it was just Mike he immediately calmed. Mike noticed that he looked off, the skin around his eyes was darker and his entire face had a green-ish tinge.

"Jesus, Will, you look terrible, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he pushed Mike's hand away, "I just feel a little crappy. Did we find a place to stay?"

"Um, yeah..." Will clearly was trying to change the subject and Mike sighed, deciding not to push it further until they'd all had a good night's sleep, "Lucas is inside getting us a room right now."

They both got out of the car, slamming the doors behind them. Will kept his hood up, pulling his phone out of his pocket and fiddling with it while Mike turned his attention back to El, who was shivering slightly. It was late June, but the temperature still fell into the low 60s and her legs were mostly bare. Mike shrugged off his navy hoodie without really thinking about it and offered it to her. She looked down at it, then back up at him and took it with docile hands, gladly snuggling into the warmth.

"Thanks," she said, giving him a tired half-smile.

"No worries. Hey, uh, do you have like, other clothes or pajamas?" He'd noticed her backpack was pretty small and that her outfit looked a few days old. Nancy had taken off with a suitcase all those years ago, but it seemed like El either hadn't had time or didn't care to bring more along. She looked at him for a second before shrugging and gesturing at what she was wearing as if to say, "these are

clothes". He bit his lip, feeling a pang of sympathy.

"Okay, well maybe in the morning we could run to Goodwill or something and you can grab some more clothes. We need to stop at Guitar Center and pick up a new cord tomorrow, I'm sure we could drop you off..." her eyes went wide at the suggestion of being alone and he changed tactics, "...or you and I could get dropped off and see what they have. Would that be cool?"

She nodded slowly, "I can get new clothes?"

"Uh, yeah, whatever you want," he shrugged. Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Yes!" she flashed him a smile. "Please."

He melted a bit, but immediately straightened back up at the sight of Lucas charging out of the motel office. His friend looked exhausted, but mostly pissed, and was heading straight for Mike. The tall boy gulped and backed up a few steps until his back hit the van. This couldn't be good.

"Guess what, Mike!" Lucas bellowed angrily, not actually letting the other boy talk, "I just spent the last fifteen minutes trying to get us a room at this shitty-ass motel because it's the only thing we can afford but the fucking asshole who owns the place won't rent us a two-bed room at the regular price because we have FIVE PEOPLE." He gestured towards El emphatically, rage riddling his face. "So either you come up with an extra thirty bucks or we get to sleep in the van tonight!"

Before Mike could answer and defend his decision, defend El, she spoke up, pushing past him and stepping up towards Lucas. Her eyes glinted and her jaw was set as she stepped in front of Mike, her stance borderline protective. Despite his anger, Lucas took a step back.

"Money?" she asked, voice hard and all of the boys blinked in confusion.

"Uh, what about it?" Lucas snarked back.

“You need it.”

“Obviously!”

She flinched at his tone, the only indication that she wasn’t sure of what she was doing, but Mike saw it and put a hand on her shoulder, trying to get her out of Lucas’s warpath. She shook him off, pulling her backpack off her shoulder and unzipping the top wide enough to stick her hand inside. When she pulled it back out she was clutching a wad of bills, which she shoved into Lucas’s chest. He barely managed to grab the wad, looking down at his hands in stunned amazement, then back up at hard stare she was giving him. *Who is this girl?*

“No more yelling, okay?” she asked, voice hard but pleading, “please?”

All four boys were stunned, but Mike recovered the quickest, given that he already knew she had money. He reached for her shoulder again and she turned to look at him, her eyes filled with unshed tears.

“El, you don’t... you don’t have to give us money.”

“No,” she turned her steel glare on him and he almost took a step back, “I want to help.” She turned her gaze back to Lucas, who was attempting to count the money he was holding. Begrudgingly, he met her eyes as she spoke. “I know you don’t want me here. I’m sorry.” She took a deep breath, like the words hurt, but kept going. “If you want me to leave now, I will. Okay?”

There was a pause as she looked around the circle of boys, measuring their reactions, trying to decide if this conversation would end with her walking down the side of the road. Dustin looked stunned, eyebrows raised, but when she met his gaze he softened a bit and shook his head. Will was watching Lucas’s face, but he glanced at Dustin and then back at her, shaking his head too. They didn’t know her that well but they didn’t want to say goodbye like this. She didn’t bother looking at Mike, knowing what his answer would be, but turned back to Lucas, waiting for his answer. He deflated, the exhaustion that had been driving his anger becoming apparent on his

face.

“It’s... it’s fine. You can stay.” He didn’t sound happy, but the harsh edge was gone.

El took it as a victory, her whole body slumping in relief. Mike caught her as her knees buckled, realizing just how exhausted she was, and helped her lean against the van. Lucas didn’t waste any time, turning on his heel and marching back into the motel office, reemerging with a key a few minutes later.

“Okay, guys, we’re in room...” he sighed, “eleven.”

He avoided the other’s gazes, knowing the irony of the situation would only end up with him getting crap and he was way too tired to deal with that right now. They all grabbed their duffle bags and trudged down the sidewalk to their room which he unlocked. The door swung open and he flicked the light switch, lighting up the dim room which had two queen-size beds with tacky pastel covers. Both the carpet and the walls were mint-colored and everything had gold plating, the lamps, the borders on the mirrors, the faucet in the bathroom. It kind of hurt to look at but it was good enough.

Dustin chucked his bag onto the floor, slid out of his jeans, and collapsed face-first onto the nearest bed. Behind him Will made a disgusted noise.

“Ew, Dustin, take the cover off before you do that,” the others gave him a look of confusion and he explained, “my mom always says most of these cheap places don’t wash the covers. It’s probably covered in... nasty stuff.” There was no reaction. He sighed. “Like piss or jizz or something.”

Dustin shot off the bed, wiping at the front of his shirt with a look of horror. “Gross!”

From the corner of the room El snorted out a laugh, a genuine one, and Mike stared at her in surprise before a smile overtook his face and he started laughing too. Will joined in while Dustin continued to look disgusted, but then Lucas chuckled and he lost it too. After another minute of exhaustion-driven laughing, they managed to calm

down enough to carefully peal the first layer off of each bed. The sheets, thankfully, looked clean and unassuming and the other boys quickly shucked off their pants, giving El, who was keeping her eyes carefully averted, uncomfortable glances. Having a girl in the room was really throwing them off.

Mike remembered what she'd said about not having pajamas and grabbed an extra shirt and a pair of sweatpants he'd brought along, passing them to her silently. She took them with a grateful smile, having realized how uncomfortable sleeping in her filthy dress would have been. Pressing the soft fabric to her cheek, she disappeared into the bathroom, shutting the door firmly behind her. Mike sighed and looked back at his friends.

Dustin, after slipping under the sheet, had passed out, his snores already filling the room. Will was stretched out next to him, checking his phone, while Lucas lay on the other bed, plugging his charger in.

Wait. Shit.

"Um, guys, where is El going to sleep?"

Lucas looked up and shrugged. "I dunno. On the floor? Ha, or she could squeeze in with us."

Mike felt his face flushing a bright red, a reaction he didn't understand.

"No," he shook his head, "she's not sleeping on the floor and she's not sharing a bed with you."

"Oh, did *you* want to share with her?" Lucas scoffed, raising an eyebrow.

"No! I mean..." Mike wasn't averse to the idea but he knew better than to say that out loud, "she's not... she won't want to share with *you*. You've been a total dick to her since you met and she doesn't know you at all!"

"Oh yeah, cause I'm sure she'll feel better about sleeping next to the guy who hit on her in a crusty-ass bar. Just admit it, you finally want to be able to say *you*—" Lucas made air quotes with his fingers,

“‘slept with a girl’ since your awkward ass can’t even get one to kiss you!”

From the other bed Will snorted, shaking his head, “That’s a low blow, Lucas.”

“She’s not sleeping with me! Or anyone!” Mike was flailing, hating that his friend was partially right but even angrier that Lucas thought he would take advantage of her. “So get off the bed!”

“We paid for these beds, Mike! I am *not* sleeping on the floor. If you want to, be my guest!” Lucas was winning and he knew it. “Either she sleeps next to me or she sleeps on the ground.”

The bathroom door opened and the cause of the bickering walked out, clutching her dirty dress and looking around in confusion. Mike gulped, not wanting to admit he liked the way she looked dressed in his clothes. A long sigh from the other bed interrupted his thoughts.

“I’ll share with her,” Will volunteered. At the blank look on Mike’s face he rolled his eyes. “I don’t like girls, *remember*? You don’t have to worry about me creeping on her in the night or whatever.”

Oh right. They all kind of forgot he was gay most of the time. It wasn’t like any of them really had any relationships, they were too busy making music and, up until a few weeks ago, passing their classes to think about it. He’d nervously told them six years ago, and they’d of course accepted him and nothing had really changed.

It was the best compromise they had and Mike nodded reluctantly. El gave him a questioning look and he quickly gestured towards the bed that Will, who had switched with Lucas, was now laying on. She glanced back at him with a frown.

“Where are you sleeping?”

Lucas tossed him an extra pillow, which he barely caught, and he let it drop onto the floor at the foot of her and Will’s bed. Luckily there had been an extra blanket in the closet and he’d formed himself a comfy-ish nest. It was better than the van. “Right here,” he told her.

“Oh,” she almost looked disappointed and he felt his heart speed up.

Was she wanting to share with me? he wondered, quickly shaking the thought away. *Keep dreaming, Wheeler.*

He offered her an encouraging smile. “I said you’d get a bed, right?” he gestured towards the bed which she was slowly easing into. “I’ll be fine down here.”

“Is the floor more comfy? Maybe I should sleep there instead,” she said with a half-smirk, trying to joke but clearly not liking the idea of him not getting bed. She was the intruder, after all, he didn’t need to sacrifice his comfort for hers.

“Nahhh, maybe I’ll get a turn at the next stop,” he frowned at his wording, “um, not sleeping *with* you—I mean sleeping next to you—but like, sleeping in a bed in general,” his face was turning red again as he fumbled even worse, “not that I wouldn’t sleep with you or anything!” she was starting to look amused and he felt his mouth go dry, “I mean, sleep *next* to you, I just don’t want you to feel weird or something because like you don’t really know us—”

“Mike,” she interrupted his tirade with a tired smile, “I understand.”

His face was still flaming but he tried to play it off. “Oh. Okay. Cool.”

“Cool,” she agreed, before pulling the sheet up around herself and snuggling down into the bed.

He let himself flop onto the floor, stifling a groan at his painful bumble. Lucas had been right about one thing, if he didn’t figure out to be less awkward around girls he was going to be a nerdy virgin until he died. He shoved that thought out, focusing on trying to get comfortable enough to sleep on the shabby carpet.

Lucas and Dustin were both out and Will, who had been kind enough to ignore Mike’s winning conversational skills, had plugged his phone into the charger before reaching over and turning off the lamp. It didn’t take long for him to fall asleep, the sounds of soft breathing and snores filling the room. Mike pulled out his own phone, realizing it was dead, and quickly rolled over to the wall to plug it in. He was exhausted, figuring he’d check it in the morning. Resting his head on the pillow, he pulled the blanket tightly around him, trying to ignore

the musty closet smell that it reeked of.

“Mike?” her voice was quiet but he perked up. He liked it when she said his name.

“Yeah, El?”

“Um, I’m sorry your friends are mad at you. At me.”

He sighed. “It’s not your fault, so don’t feel bad, okay? Just... just get some sleep.”

There was a pause and then the rustle of sheets.

“Okay,” she sounded unconvinced, “night, Mike.”

“Night, El.”

&&&

A single beam of sunlight lasered right onto Mike’s eye, slowly heating it up and turning the inside of his lid a vivid pink. He made an annoyed huffing sound, reaching up to try and rub the sunbeam away. It didn’t work, of course, and instead he ended up smacking himself in the face with his hand. He snorted and sat up.

The carpet was rough beneath his palms and he gazed, bleary-eyed, around the small outdated motel room. It took him a second to remember where he was. He scooted himself over to the wall, where his phone was, and checked the time. It was a little after noon and he begrudgingly decided that he’d had enough sleep, rubbing at his crusty eyes and yawning widely. He could still hear Dustin’s snores, meaning he wasn’t the last to wake up. The door to the bathroom was closed and the water was running, which meant that someone had to be showering. He sighed. He needed to pee really bad. Luckily, the water turned off and he decided he could hold it for a few more minutes.

With a grunt he pushed himself upright, wincing as the sunlight from one of the partially-opened curtains hit him right in the face. Blinking, he stood up all the way, trying to get out of sunlight, and looked over at the bed he'd been sleeping at the foot of. Both sides were empty. He glanced over at the other bed, where Dustin and Lucas were still passed out. His heart sped up as a strange panic filled his chest. Where was El?

The bathroom door swung open and she appeared in a cloud of steam. She was still wearing his shirt and sweats, but her hair was a wet tangle, pushed back from her face. The thick layers of eyeshadow and mascara had come off too, leaving her pale skin looking fresh, the faintest hint of glitter whispering on her cheek. With her hair and heavy eye makeup no longer overtaking her, he saw the features of her face more defined, her hazel-browns blinking back at him brightly. She smiled at him and he reminded himself to breath.

"Uh, hey, El."

"Morning," she smiled back.

She looked like she felt better, padding softly across the room to grab something out of her backpack. It was bulging now, stuffed too full of dirty clothes, and he remembered what he'd said about Goodwill, thinking maybe they could find her a bigger bag while they were.

"Are you done in the bathroom?" he asked.

She nodded and he made a bee-line for the tiny restroom, grateful that, despite the bit of mold on the ceiling and the leaky faucet, it had a functioning toilet. It was still warm and humid and he debated on whether he should shower now or later. He took a whiff of his armpit and grimaced. *Guess I'll take a shower now.*

When he reemerged, El was sitting up on the bed, holding what looked like a small leather journal and pen. She had been scribbling in it, but glanced up when he walked back in.

"I'm gonna shower before the other two wake up," he looked at the empty spot on the bed next to her, "did you see where Will went?"

"He left," she gestured to the door with a shrug, "said he was going for a walk?"

Mike noticed Will's phone was gone too and figured he went out to call his mom or something. With another shrug he grabbed some clean clothes from his duffle and headed back to the bathroom. By the time he'd finished showering, Lucas was awake and Mike was quickly rushed from the bathroom, wrapped in nothing but his towel, so Lucas could use the toilet.

He sat on the edge of the bed where Dustin was still laying, face down, and rubbed his arms. The room was kind of cold, but he hadn't had the chance to dry off well enough to put a shirt one. He glanced over his shoulder at El, who quickly looked back down at her journal. *Was she looking at me?* He felt a pang of self-consciousness and quickly pulled his shirt on, deciding it would have to dry out eventually anyways. The toilet flushed and then Lucas came out of the bathroom and Mike quickly ducked back in so he could put his damn pants on.

He'd always been self-conscious around girls. Growing up he'd been called "Frogface", the pale, skinny, awkward nerd who couldn't throw to save his life and got picked on. Since then, he'd grown considerably taller, his shoulders broadening him out and making him what his mother referred to as "proportional". From anybody else's perspective he just looked like a tall, lanky teenager, but Mike had never been able to shake the idea that he was too scrawny.

When he came out he found Lucas and Dustin both waiting for showers and stepped aside to let them battle out who would get to go first. Lucas won, of course, but Mike was too busy googling the nearest Goodwill to really notice. He grinned at his phone as he got his answer.

"Hey. El." She looked over at him, eyes questioning. "There's a Goodwill in a strip mall about a half mile away. Did you want to walk down there while the rest of the them get ready? We could get you some new clothes."

Her eyes brightened at the mention of clothing and she nodded earnestly, sitting up and then reaching down to pull on her pink

Chucks. Mike looked back down at his phone, typing in another search.

“Oh, sweet, there’s a Guitar Center in the same strip. We can just meet up with the guys when we’re done,” he turned to Dustin, “can you tell Lucas that?”

“Yeah, sure,” Dustin replied distractedly. He’d found the remote and was lazily flicking through the seven channels the motel had, settling on a rerun of Sesame Street. “See you later.”

Mike slid on his Vans and checked the pockets of his cargo shorts to make sure he had his wallet. El was waiting next to the door, looking eager, her backpack slung over her shoulder. She turned the handle as he got closer and almost bounced out the doorway, looking at him with a smile of excitement. He felt himself smile back, following her out the door and promptly running right into Will.

“Woah!” Will yelped, stepping back and nearly tripping over his own feet.

Mike caught his shoulder and helped him stay upright, but he caught a strange smell, like rotten eggs, and his face scrunched up as he took step back from his friend. “Damn, Will, you smell *awful*.”

Will backed up a few more steps, face green and worried.

“Oh, heh, I better go in and take a shower then.”

Before Mike, or El, could say anything the younger boy slipped past them and into the motel room, the door shutting firmly behind him. Mike blinked.

“Well that was weird.”

El shrugged at him, unsure of what to say and he let the incident slip from his mind, grabbing his phone out of his pocket instead and checking the directions to the store. It was off the main drag they were already on, and after figuring out which way was north, he steered them in the correct direction and started to stroll down the sidewalk, El walking quietly beside him. He was trying to think of some way to start a conversation, but that thought was smothered by

the sound of his stomach rumbling. The fast-food restaurants that lined the street were in full lunch rush mode, drive-thru lines wrapping around the buildings, the smell of greasy burgers and fries filling the air.

“Holy shit I’m starving,” he said aloud. A fierce growl sounded from El’s stomach and she looked at him sheepishly as he chuckled. “Guess you are too... did you want to grab some breakfast? Well... lunch.”

She nodded, still silent, and he pointed at a few of options in front of them.

“Let’s see, there’s McDonald’s, Wendy’s, Arby’s, I think... that’s a Burger King?” he looked across the road, “and there’s a Dunkin Donuts and a Taco Bell. So,” he turned to her, “what are you hungry for?”

“Um,” her eyes were wide and she looked overwhelmed.

“Why don’t go get coffee and donuts? We can pretend it’s breakfast still,” he rescued her, feeling bad for putting her on the spot, “it’s too bad they don’t have a Waffle House though...”

“A what?”

“A Waffle House?”

She gave him a blank stare.

“You’ve never been to Waffle House? Oh that’s tragic, if we find one I’m going to make us stop so you can try it, they have like... every kind of waffle. Even chicken and waffles. All day.” He let out a blissful sigh, his stomach rumbling again. “And no one judges you if you put syrup on your eggs. It’s kind of trashy honestly, but I think it’s a sacred place.” He glanced over at her, noticing that her eyes still looked blank. “What, you don’t like breakfast food?”

She made a face and gave a neutral shrug, which he mistook for not understanding.

“You don’t know what breakfast is?”

“Of course I know what breakfast is,” she rolled her eyes, “but it’s... okay I guess.”

“What?! Breakfast is like the best meal of the day!” he seemed mildly offended, shaking his head in disbelief. “What do you usually eat in the morning?”

“Um, egg whites and toast and a banana,” she frowned as she felt her stomach rumble again at the thought of food, “but, I’ll eat whatever right now.”

“Egg whites and... jeez, El, did you live in a prison?” he joked.

Her frown deepened and Mike got another weird tinge, sensing he’d said something wrong but wasn’t sure what. It was just a joke, but she seemed to be taking it way too seriously. She hadn’t actually been stuck in prison... had she?

“It was... it was what he let me eat,” she replied quietly.

She was holding herself tightly, hands gripping the t-shirt that she wore. Her whole body was tense and her eyes seemed distant, like she was reliving some bad memory. *Jesus, what did I say?* he wondered, alarmed by her reaction.

“El, are you okay?” he tentatively reached out to her, patting her shoulder in an awkward attempt to comfort her. “Did I say something?”

His touch brought her out of it and she shook her head as if she were trying to shake out whatever ghost was haunting her.

“It’s fine,” she mumbled turning back to look at the Dunkin Donuts he’d pointed out, “can we get some food now?”

They crossed the street in silence. Mike was worried he’d say something wrong again and El didn’t seem to be in the mood to talk any more. They were both a bit hangry too, and when they entered the coffee shop, both of their stomachs let out irritated groans. Mike ordered for the two of them, noticing that El looked overwhelmed again. He ordered four donuts, two each, and two cups of iced coffee. When he went to pull out his wallet, she stopped him with a gentle

hand and a shake of her head, reaching into her backpack and pulling out a crisp twenty.

“El, it’s fine, I got it,” he tried to pull his hand from her grip, “you have to buy clothes, remember?”

Her grip only tightened and she shook her head again. “I have enough.”

She slapped the twenty down before he could protest and before he knew what was happening they were sitting across from each other at a little table. He looked down at his food, his hunger taking over, and began to consume one of his donuts, slurping down his coffee between bites and basking in the glorious caffeine. El still hadn’t touched her food as he took a bite out of his second donut.

“Are you going to eat?” he asked, suddenly concerned that maybe she didn’t like coffee or donuts, “I mean, if you don’t like it I could get you something else...”

El shook her head to tell him it was fine, bringing the unassuming breakfast food up to her nose and sniffing it before taking a cautious bite. Her eyes flew wide and she tried to shove the rest of the donut into her mouth with what had to be a delighted shudder, quickly taking another bite. He watched in amazement as she devoured both of her donuts in a matter of seconds, and then looked down at her empty hands with sad eyes. Without really thinking he handed her the rest of his half-eaten one and she didn’t say anything, just grabbed it from him with a grateful look and began chewing on it, eyes scrunched up in joy.

Mike tried to hide the smile that he knew was on his face. Now *that* had been cute.

“So... you’ve never had a donut?”

She shook her head, licking the last bit of glaze off her fingers. “I think when I was little, but not for years. Too fattening. Unnecessary caloric intake.”

“But like, you’re not fat,” he blurted out.

"I know," she shrugged, "but I'm not supposed to be."

She took a long sip of her coffee, looking down at the cup in her hands with barely hidden wonder.

"It's sweet."

"Well, yeah, they put cream and sugar in it," he said, surprised again.

"I could only have it black. And not too much."

The conversation lapsed as Mike tried to understand why she'd had such harsh dietary restrictions. She definitely wasn't fat, if anything she almost looked too thin for her shorter frame, but he'd noticed (not that he would ever admit he'd been looking) that her legs seemed muscley, or at the very least toned. You couldn't call her curvy, but she wasn't shapeless and he wondered why anyone would try to control what she ate when clearly she wasn't in danger of suddenly gaining fifty pounds or something. Not that he really thought it mattered.

El was busy looking around at the other people in the establishment, observing and taking everything in like she'd never seen tired people ordering coffee before. Mike realized that maybe she hadn't, that a lot of this was a new experience. It hit him just how little he knew about her, how much he'd just assumed. He would stand by his judgement that she was a harmless runaway, but it dawned on him that he didn't know her last name or where she was from or even how old she was.

Gathering his courage, he took another sip of coffee and started a conversation he could already tell wouldn't be welcomed by the mysterious girl sitting across from him. She looked back at him just as he opened his mouth, as if she'd been anticipating it.

"Hey, El?"

She took the straw out of her mouth to answer. "Yeah?"

"Would it be cool if I just, asked you a few things?"

Her expression immediately became guarded, but she shrugged.

“Okay.”

“Um, how old are you?” he started with the easiest question.

“Eighteen.”

“Oh, cool, I’m nineteen, did you just graduate too?” her brows furrowed at his question, “like from high school?”

“Oh... I didn’t go to high school.”

That was definitely a little abnormal, but he was relieved to find out she wasn’t that much younger than him and figured she must have been home-schooled.

“So you were home-schooled then?”

“Home-schooled? Oh, like a tutor? I had one of those.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the same thing,” he wasn’t expecting her to have a private tutor, and he figured she must have grown up fairly wealthy, “I think it’s just being taught outside of a high school? At home?”

“I don’t have a home,” she looked down at the sticky donut wrappers.

That line again. She’d said that at the bar too. He still didn’t quite know what it meant, but knew better than to ask directly, seeing if he couldn’t get an answer in a more roundabout way.

“Well, um, where are you from?”

She shrugged at that. “Everywhere.”

Mike was getting a little annoyed. Yeah, this girl was cute and had a voice he could only describe as ethereal, but she was so vague and unreadable that he felt like he must have imagined that he was attracted to her. He huffed as his temper flared a bit.

“So you’re from everywhere, but you don’t have a home,” he crossed his arms, “you have... god know’s how much money in that bag but you don’t have any clothes. You don’t have phone, you’ve never

eaten a donut, and your voice is just..." he didn't need to finish the sentence and instead pressed his hand to his forehead with an exasperated sigh. "Look, I get you don't want to talk to about it, and honestly you don't have to but I mean... I'm not trying to be creepy, but I think you're kind of cool and I invited you along because I was trying to help and... can you really not tell me *anything*?"

At first she'd looked hurt at the tone of his voice, but as he slumped back in defeat she let out a long sigh. She couldn't pretend like she hadn't thought it would come to this, but she was surprised it was coming from Mike and not one of the other boys. He was the one she trusted the most and she was grateful to him for going out of his way to make her feel safe, especially when she hadn't asked or expected it. That was part of the reason she couldn't let herself be honest with him. Or at least... not yet. She wanted to keep him safe.

She let her gaze drift up to his frustrated, freckled face, feeling that shivering in her stomach again, like she had last night when he'd come over to the bar and talked to her. It was something she hadn't experienced before and she hadn't quite figured out exactly what it was. But it made her want to talk to him, to tell him at least a bit of the truth, so she let the words slip out, hoping she wouldn't regret it.

"I haven't lived in once place since I was eight."

His eyes caught hers and he looked surprised that she was actually talking. She kept going, trying to grab the bit of courage that was fluttering in her ribcage like a trapped bird.

"It was mostly hotel rooms, or rented apartments. The apartments were in New York and LA, cause we were there a lot. Everywhere else was just hotels," she paused and let that sink in, "I was born in Indiana. My parents died when I was six. Then I lived with my aunt Becky."

"So you're from Indiana? Why did you start traveling?" Mike asked, leaning forward a bit.

"She killed herself. When I was eight." She couldn't meet his eyes.

"Oh. Oh shit, El, I'm sorry, we don't... you don't have to talk about

it."

She let out a breath, shrugging her shoulders.

"It's whatever. After that... Papa took care of me. And we went everywhere."

"Who's Papa?"

He remembered she'd said that name when he'd woken her up the night before. Was that the unnamed "he" that she mentioned earlier? The one who put her on such a strict diet? The one she had to be running away from? He came out of his thoughts and realized her face was twisted in pain. She was shaking her head, eyes darting around, looking like she wanted to bolt from the restaurant.

"I-I," she was breathing rapidly, the beginnings of a panic attack, her voice barely stuttering, "I c-can't t-talk—"

He recognized what was happening. A few months after Nancy had run away there had been a day when Holly had gone over to friend's house without telling anyone. While his dad drove around and scoured the neighborhood, Mike had stayed home and tried to calm down his frantic mother. It was the first time he'd learned how to handle this kind of panic, but it hadn't been the last.

Now he reacted automatically, reaching out and grabbing El's hands, trying to get her to look at him, trying to get her focus off of whatever memory or fear was suddenly consuming her.

"Woah, hey, it's okay. You don't have to talk about him," her gaze locked onto his and he squeezed her hands, trying to calm her, "just, take some deep breaths. You're okay. He's not here, okay?"

It took her a few seconds, to blink out of whatever had filled her with such panic, and he started breathing deeply, trying to coax her to do the same. She followed his breathing, gasping in the oxygen she needed to come back to reality. Tears filled her eyes and she realized she had a death grip on his hands, unclenching and pulling one back to wipe at her eyes.

"S-Sorry."

He shook his head, face earnest and honest.

"It's okay. Really. I get it," he decided to let the subject drop, not wanting to make her talk if it would result in that. It wasn't worth it. "We don't have to talk about him anymore, okay?"

She nodded slowly, taking another deep breath, amazed at how calm he made her feel. Her eyes drifted back up to his. "Okay."

He was still holding her hand, the calluses on his fingers from years of guitar-playing rough against her skin. Realizing what he was doing he quickly pulled back, shoving his hand into his lap as his face bloomed red. Real smooth. He coughed, changing the subject, wanting to keep what had just happened to her from happening again.

"Um, have you ever sang for like an audience? Your voice is like... I mean, you *should*."

That was easier to talk about, in a way, and she nodded, hoping she wouldn't give away too much.

"I started singing when I was seven. My aunt got me a voice teacher after I sang in a couple of school plays and stuff," she looked at her hand, which was still resting on the table top, clenching it into a fist, "Papa had me sing. It was okay at first but then he changed it to other stuff. Stuff I didn't like. Music I didn't write. I couldn't do it anymore so..." she didn't have to say the words *I ran away* because it was obvious. She shrugged. "I'm eighteen. I want to sing what I want now." Her eyes blinked warmly, filling with soft admiration. "Like you do, with your band and your songs. I like that."

It took a second for Mike to absorb all of it, but he felt himself flushing again at her compliment.

"Well, hey, now that you're away you could do that," he swallowed, "I mean I can't speak for the guys but if you want when we head over to Guitar Center we could grab one of the demo rooms and look at your songs." He gave her a curious look. "Do you play anything?"

She nodded. "Guitar, piano, violin, flute, clarinet, bass guitar," Mike's

eyes flew wide but she wasn't done yet, "saxophone, trumpet, trombone, ukelele and I can play the drums but..." she wrinkled her nose, "I'm not that good."

Mike blinked. "Jesus Christ."

She frowned at his reaction and he quickly recovered.

"How do you... you can really play all those things? How?"

"There wasn't anything else to do. I like music... so I learned. I was allowed to have any kind of music lesson if it helped."

"Helped with what?"

"Um... to keep me singing what he wanted."

Both of their cups were empty now and El was starting to look restless, partly because of the caffeine but mostly because the conversation was circling back to the person she didn't want to talk about. Mike decided he'd found out enough for now. He wanted to know more about her and her mysterious Papa. The man who wasn't her actual dad but some sort of guardian who made her sing? And sing crap, apparently. Whatever she'd been forced to sing before had to have been pretty bad if she completely abandoned it to drive across the Midwest in a smelly van with a bunch of teenage boys.

He grabbed their empty cups and stood up.

"Did you want to head Goodwill now?" He checked his phone for messages. "I don't have any messages so they guys haven't left yet which means we still have time."

Her excitement came back at the prospect of shopping.

"Yes!"

They headed out, back into the summer heat, falling into the silence that Mike was noticing was less awkward and more just comfortable. She didn't always speak, and he was starting to realize that it might be because she just wasn't used to it. He decided he was okay with it.

It didn't take long for them to get to the Goodwill, but when they walked in, El froze, taking in with wide eyes the racks and racks full of used clothing. He led her to shirts first, noticing how she gravitated towards the darker colored things, pouring through the black and red shirts and picking out a few. She headed for the skirts next, and then somewhat reluctantly the jeans. *She must not like pants or something*, he observed. Her arms were getting full so he ran to the front of the store to grab a basket.

When he came back to the clothing, she was still engrossed in the dress section, looking at a bright red 80s prom dress with interest. She held it up to herself and frowned at the size before setting it back on the rack. A dark purple one behind it caught her eye and she grabbed it excitedly, tugging at the polka-dotted mesh overlay. She looked like a kid in a candy store and Mike couldn't keep himself from smiling at her excitement and half-lidded scrutiny. Her basket was starting to overflow a bit and he remembered the other thing she would need.

"El, I'm going to go see if they have any bags or suitcases for you to put your stuff in," he told her, "are you okay by yourself for a bit?"

She didn't bother to answer, just waved her hand in acknowledgment, too busy comparing an old bridesmaid dress to the purple one in her hand. He grinned, enjoying her happiness, before turning and heading to the other side of the store where the bags were. It took him about ten minutes to find an old gym bag that he hoped would be big enough for whatever she was going to buy. When he went back to the clothing section, he couldn't find her, panicking for a second until he caught a glimpse of blonde hair from one of the aisles that held what could only be described as various beauty department junk. She was holding up a clear, plastic bag and Mike quickly went over to her.

"What's this?" she asked as soon as he got close enough.

He examined the bag. It was mishmash of hair scissors, an old, plug-in electric razor that was missing its guide combs, and several hair picks and combs. All for one low price. He gestured to his hair.

"It's stuff for cutting hair, but more for guys, I think," he watched as

she threw the bag into her basket, feeling his brows go up his forehead, "...are you planning on cutting your hair?"

The warm walk had dried her hair, and while she'd washed it, she hadn't been able to get the ratty tangles out. It was golden blonde and almost reached her butt, the thick waves overtaking her frame as it frizzed in the summer heat. It looked kinda messy but he didn't understand why she would want to cut it. Most girls he knew, mainly his sisters, wanted long hair, but he was getting the vibe that El wasn't exactly like most girls.

She tugged at the long, knotted locks, annoyed.

"It's not real," she pulled at the base so Mike could almost see her roots, which looked brunette, "it's sewn on."

"You have a weave?" his eyebrows shot up even further.

He only what it was because Lucas had joked about getting dreads once when they were sixteen and in a reggae funk. None of them understood how he'd be able to get dreads so quickly so he'd had to explain how his natural, African-American hair could be styled so that you could sew on wefts of hair or fake dreads. Mike hadn't realized white people could do it too and he blinked, surprised.

"Why do you have a weave?"

"*He* wanted me to have blonde hair," she yanked more cruelly, "I hate it."

He wanted to tell her that she looked pretty, that the blonde hair looked good on her, but after growing up with two sisters he knew better than to try and compliment something that a girl hated about herself. And it wasn't her real hair, so he figured she was allowed to dislike it, especially since it hadn't been her choice.

"There's... too much and I don't know what to do with it," she sighed, sounding defeated, "I've never had to do it myself before."

Mike decided to draw her attention away from her hair, since he was equally useless, and held up the bag he'd found it. It was navy and said "Average Joe's Gym" on it, but she bobbed her head happily at

the sight, glad she would have something other than her backpack to store her stuff in. They headed towards the changing rooms so she could try on her findings and Mike felt his pocket vibrating. She disappeared behind one of the curtains and he quickly slid his phone out of his pocket. Dustin was calling him.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Mike! Where are you guys?”

“We’re at Goodwill, I told you we were coming here.”

“Oh... yeah I forgot,” Dustin relayed that to the others before coming back on, “okay well we’re at McDonald’s but when we’re doing we’re going to head to Guitar Center to pick up a new cord—what? Hang on, I’ll tell him. Mike, Lucas was wondering if you’d found us a gig for tonight.”

Mike frowned. “...I’m at a Goodwill. Why would I have found anything?”

“I dunno he just wanted me to ask. Hang on let me tell him—”

“It’s fine, just tell him we’ll meet you guys at Guitar Center. It’s on the same strip mall as Goodwill.”

“Oh that’s convenient.”

“I know.”

El’s curtain rustled and Mike looked up, mouth going dry and he barely sputtered out, “Igottagobye” before hanging up, eyes glued to the girl in front of him.

She’d picked out dark red and black ringer tee and tucked it into plain black skater skirt that hit her mid-thigh. Over the shirt she’d pulled on an acid-washed denim jacket that was a little too big, and she’d kept on her black knee-highs. It wasn’t anything fancy, but she looked damn good. The darker colors were almost harsh, but it made her look more badass and older, more mature. Before, in the yellow dress and messy face, she’d been pretty, but now she was downright *hot* and he gulped heavily.

“Does this look okay?” she asked, looking down at herself with an uncertain gaze. He couldn’t make himself speak quite yet so he just nodded frantically, looking like an elastic-necked cartoon character bobbing up and down helplessly. She was holding a black shirt with a yellow smiley face on it and the purple dress, looking uncertain.

“Is it... too dark?” She bit her lip, brow furrowed.

“You look good, El,” he blurted.

He hadn’t meant to let that comment spill out, but the smile that overtook her face made him feel a little less embarrassed. Maybe she didn’t get a whole lot of compliments? She’d lit up when he’d told her how amazing her voice was too.

“Thank you,” she said shyly, looking down at her feet, “I like these clothes.”

El did a little twirl, pleased with how she looked.

“I wasn’t allowed to wear to wear too much black but,” she glanced back at the pile of clothing in the changing room, “it feels good.”

She disappeared back behind the curtain before he could embarrass himself further, which he was grateful for. But then she appeared in the purple dress and he felt his mind go blank again. She’d found a hair tie somewhere and managed to pull her hair up into a messy bun and the effect was stellar, showing off her long neck and collar bones, which were accented by the mesh that formed the top over the sweetheart neckline of the main fabric.

“W-Wow,” he stuttered.

“Good?”

“Yah.”

She smiled and disappeared again and he managed to shake himself out of it once again. He remembered the phone call and realized that, as much as he was enjoying watching her play dress up, they didn’t have time for him to be struck stupid every time she reappeared.

“Hey, El?”

“Yeah?” she replied from the other side of the curtain.

“Um, we gotta hurry it up a bit. Can you just pick what you like best while you’re in there?”

“Okay...” there was a pause, “I haven’t looked at shoes yet.”

“Oh... what size are you?”

“Seven and a half.”

“Do you want me to go look?”

“Um... sure? I want boots. Black boots.”

He stood up, spying the shoes in the far corner.

“Okay, I’ll see what I can find.”

There weren’t a ton of options, but the shoe goddess must have been smiling down on him because amid the old sneakers and ugly, clunky heels there was a pair of beat-up, combat boots with tattered laces and zippers to get them on and off. And they were black. He snatched them up, double-checking that they were size seven and half and then resisted doing a victory dance when they were. He almost pranced back to her dressing room, carefully holding them up over the curtain and clearing his throat. She snatched them out of his hands with something that sounded like an excited shriek.

“Thank you!”

It was another five minutes before she came out, back in his shirt and sweats but clutching a dozen different pieces of clothing including a pair of jeans, a few more shirts, a jean skirt, and that purple dress. Good. He’d really liked that dress.

“Ready to check out?”

She nodded and they headed to the front, reaching the bored looking cashier. Mike didn’t even blink when she pulled out another hundred,

but he made a mental note to try and figure out how she'd managed to get so much money before she'd run off. Then he frowned. Maybe he didn't want to know. When they got to the doors she paused.

"Mike?" she looked embarrassed, "um, where can I buy underwear? And socks?"

"Uhh," he tried to think about her question and not the fact his face was heating up again, "uhhhh... uh, Target? Or Walmart? Hang on."

He did a quick google search and frowned at the results. Nothing nearby. There was Walgreens on the strip mall between where they were and the Guitar Center and he googled "does Walgreens sell underwear?" feeling weird at first but then relieved when it appeared that they did.

"Walgreens. We can stop at Walgreens. For socks and stuff."

She was too embarrassed to talk and Mike knew better than to try so they walked there in silence again, both walking more quickly than before. The pharmacy/convenience store was outdated like the rest of the town, but El quickly disappeared down the "clothing" aisle and grabbed some packs from the limited assortment. She didn't wait for him as she ducked into several other aisles and then ran up to the cashier and quickly checked out. He met her in the food section.

"I'm going to go and change in the bathroom," she offered him a smile before disappearing again. He wandered up and down the aisle, futilely browsing the value bags of Reese's and mini Hershey's bars. It wasn't really his fault that he'd forgotten the basics, but it embarrassed him a bit nonetheless. He chose to focus on the wide selection of Arizona teas instead of thinking about his blunder. After ten more minutes she found him again, dressed in the first outfit she'd tried on, but with the boots on instead of her pink Chucks. She looked like she felt better about her appearance, smiling happily.

"We can go now," she told him. So they did.

On the walk over he noticed that she smelled good, like some kind of perfume, and that she was wearing eyeliner and mascara. She must have grabbed all that while they were in there too.

The van was parked in the lot out front of Guitar Center but Mike didn't see any of the guys when he walked in, figuring they were in the equipment side of the store. He headed for the acoustic guitar "barn", opening the glass door and ushering El in. It was kept at a certain temperature and humidity, to keep the guitars that lined the walls in the best possible condition. Mike walked towards the Taylors with a quiet reverence, gently taking one down and giving it a loving strum. He sighed at the sound.

"I've been trying to save up for one of these since I was sixteen but," he strummed another chord, "something always comes up. If we ever hit it big..."

He was almost cradling the thing, and El's eyes crinkled with amusement. She reached up towards one of the other guitars, gently running her hand across the smooth wood and strings.

"I wanted to bring my guitar with me," she sighed, "but it was too big."

"Did you want to play?" he asked, holding it out to her but she shook her head.

"No, you can."

She wanted to hear him play as much as he wanted to hear her sing again. An employee popped his head into the room, surprising her a bit and she turned to look at the older guy as he smiled at the two.

"Did you guys need any help?"

"Yeah," Mike gently pulled the guitar away from his body, "could we get one of your demo rooms?"

The employee gave him an apologetic look, "Sorry, man, we don't have those here. Our store was too small to add any when they built it but," he gestured to the room they were in, "you can play in here if you want, the store is pretty empty this time of day."

It would have to do and Mike nodded with a smile, glancing at El before he gave the employee a thumb's up.

“That works. Thanks.”

They were left alone again and Mike went over to one of the stools that sat in the corner, tugging it towards the middle of the medium-sized room. El grabbed one too, setting her gym bag full of clothes next to her and scooting towards him a bit, waiting expectantly. His mind went blank.

“Um, so like... did you want to sing something or... ?”

She shrugged. “You can play whatever. Like you did at Mirkwood?”

His mind went to oldies first and he started plucking out the first song that came to mind. It was one of the first ones he'd ever learned, a common beginner's song, and he worried for a second that she would think it was dumb, but her eyes immediately lit up with recognition. He wasn't sure if she was going to sing so he started it.

“Ain't no sunshine when she's gone

It's not warm when she's away.”

She was tapping the rhythm out on her knee, nodding her head in time and he kept going.

“Ain't no sunshine when she's gone

And she's always gone too long

Anytime she goes away.”

He was into it now, encouraged by her slight smile, but almost fell off his stool when she joined him, doing a soulful harmony to his melody.

“Wonder this time where she's gone

Wonder if she's gone to stay

Ain't no sunshine when she's gone

And this house just ain't no home

Anytime she goes away.”

Her voice was like a separate entity that crept around the room, filling the space with sound and sending shivers down his spine. He didn't even realize he'd quit singing until she stopped too, looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

“S-Sorry,” he said sheepishly, “your voice is just like... wow.”

“Thanks,” she wrinkled her nose in a smile and pointed at his guitar, wanting to finish the song. He nodded but said, “You do the melody now.”

*“And I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,”*

They were both smiling in an attempt not to laugh at the obscene amount of repetition in the song. Mike took an over exaggerated gasp of breath between “I knows” and El almost lost it, shaking her head at his attempt to make her laugh.

*“I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know,
Hey, I oughtta leave young thing alone
But ain't no sunshine when she's gone.”*

Behind her, through the glass of the door, Mike spotted Dustin. The two made eye contact and Mike tried to beckon him with his chin while singing and playing at the same time. Dustin got the hint and headed towards them, reaching the door and gently pushing it open.

*“Ain't no sunshine when she's gone
Only darkness every day.*

Ain't no sunshine when she's gone

And this house just ain't no home

Anytime she goes away."

Dustin took a half-step into the room and froze, his eyes widening in amazement as he listened to them singing. El had her eyes shut, breathing the music in like it was oxygen. She didn't see Mike's grin, didn't notice Dustin's arrival, too lost in the freedom of singing.

"Anytime she goes away.

Anytime she goes away.

Anytime she goes away."

He let her finish the song herself and when she opened her eyes she saw his grinning face. His eyes flicked past her head and she turned to see an astounded Dustin, still frozen in shock.

"Holy shit," he managed. "Holy shit! El, you *can* sing! You can *sing!*"

She felt her entire face heat up, but she was pleased to hear such a genuine reaction. Dustin whipped back around and pushed the door open.

"Lucas! Lucas, hey! Grab Will and get in here, I found Mike and El!" he yelled to Lucas, who had just turned the corner. Lucas looked confused but looked around, disappearing before reappearing with Will in tow, the younger boy looked equally confused.

By the time they finally entered the room Dustin was almost bouncing up and down in excitement and Mike's face looked like it was going to break if he smiled any wider. Lucas looked skeptical, unsure of what could cause such excitement. He saw Mike and scowled, the grudge from last night reawakening.

"What took you guys so long?" he questioned, noticing El's change in appearance but not caring too much. "I thought you were just stopping at Goodwill really quick?"

Mike frowned as El wilted at the jab.

“We had to stop at Walgreens too.”

“What for?”

“She needed...” He gestured vaguely towards her, “Under... things.”

“Oh, did you help her with her *underthings*, Mike?” Dustin asked, waggling his eyebrows.

“Shut it, Dustin!” he growled before turning back to Lucas and shrugging, “anyways that’s why we’re late so... sue me.”

Lucas turned his annoyance onto Dustin. “What did you drag us in here for?”

“Because of El! She was singing and Lucas, look, I know you didn’t believe Mike when he said it because it’s obvious he’s got the hots for her,” Mike made a noise or protest which they all ignored, “but like, she was singing and I... like I can’t even describe it you just, you gotta hear her sing.” He turned to El, projecting his overwhelming excitement at her, nearly screaming in her face. “You *need* to sing again!”

Normally she didn’t mind singing, the fear of an audience having been conditioned out of her long ago, but something about being put on the spot, about this being some sort of test made her freeze in place, heart thudding in her chest. Mike noticed how she tensed up and reached over to give her a reassuring pat, shooting Dustin an annoyed look.

“Take it easy, Dustin. I already told you guys she could sing just...” he looked at her, “just give her a minute. She has an audience now.” She looked less alarmed and more just uncomfortable, looking between Lucas and Mike with furrowed brows. He figured he could help her out. “El, did you want to sing ‘Ain’t No Sunshine’ again?”

“No...”

He tried not to feel disappointed. “Um, well did you have something else in mind?”

“Yes...” she gave him an apologetic look, “I don’t think you know it.”

“That’s... fine. Here.”

He handed over the guitar and she took it from him with careful hands. She nestled it into her lap and let out a sigh of relief. She’d missed her guitar the past few days, and she shifted to get more comfortable, leaning over the body and placing her fingers carefully on the strings. After giving it a few gentle strums to get the feeling of playing back in her hands, she glanced up at Mike. He nodded encouragingly and she took a deep breath, ignoring the others, focusing on her hands and playing the first chords. She opened her mouth and surrendered to the song.

“Oh today I’m just a drop of water

And I’m running down a mountainside,”

If she had opened her eyes she would have seen the stunned amazement that crossed Lucas’s face, the quiet admiration that shone in Will’s eyes. Mike smiled triumphantly, and Dustin, if it was even possible, looked even more excited. But she was too busy feeling the song, one of her favorites, as it vibrated through every part of her being.

“Come tomorrow I’ll be in the ocean

I’ll be rising with the morning tide.”

There was a promise in those words, one she held closely, and she kept going, pouring every bit of herself into melody.

“There’s a ghost upon the moor tonight

Now it’s in our house

When you walked into the room just then

It’s like the sun came out.”

She vocalized, pushing the longing that had built up inside of her for so long out of her heart and into her voice, strumming the guitar.

Dustin nudged Will, nodding towards Mike, who was looking at her with an expression of utter captivation.

“I’m an atom in a sea of nothing

Looking for another to combine.”

She opened her eyes as the words took an abrupt new meaning in her mind, one she hadn’t considered before, one that was equally unexpected as it was pleasant. Her gaze met Mike’s and his ebony eyes locked onto her hazel-browns as she spun her soul into music.

“Maybe we could be the start of something

Be together at the start of time.”

His mouth fell open but she pushed on, the shivering in her stomach creeping into her ribcage.

“There’s a ghost upon the moor tonight

Now it’s in our house.

When you walked into the room just then

It’s like the sun came out.”

Dustin moved closer to Lucas to whisper something in his ear, but Lucas shoved him away with hushed, “shhh!” before he could say anything.

“It’s like the sun came out.”

Mike couldn’t look away, not even if he wanted to, her song stopping him, her stare entrapping him. He was a fly caught in a spider’s web that was so beautiful he didn’t mind if he was consumed.

“And the day is clear

My voice is just a whisper

Louder than the screams you hear

It's like the sun came out."

Lucas was captivated by her voice too, amazed at what he was hearing. It had been easy to assume she was just trying to bum a free ride by smiling sweetly at his gullible friend, but as he looked between the two he realized a few things: she was genuinely talented like Mike had told him, her talent might actually be able to help them if she sang with them, and that his awkward friend was an absolute goner.

"It's like the sun came out.

It's like the sun came out.

It's like the sun came out."

The guitar was quiet as her hands went still and she finished the last line without music, repeating the words one last time, letting her voice ring out.

"It's like the sun came out."

It was deathly silent, the entire room seeming to hold it's breath as the last note left her throat. For a moment everything, everyone, was frozen. Then Dustin burst into applause, startling everyone else. Will joined, his claps softer but still enthusiastic and El blinked, looking over at the other boys for first time, remembering that they were even there. She started to turn her head to look back at Mike, sudden anxiety rising in her chest. She needed to see his face again, to gauge his reaction to her bold stare and words, the words she'd sung to him.

But the sound of a third set of hands clapping made her freeze and turn back.

It was Lucas, and for the first time since she'd met him, the anger and annoyance and judgement had left his face, a genuine smile of appreciation gracing his features instead. He was clapping loudly, looking impressed.

El felt a smile light up her face.

Notes for the Chapter:

the ending is one of my sad attempts at not-cliffhangery cliffhanger?? i personally hate them cause they give me anxiety but at the same time i know they really help to set up for the next chapter. ugh.

i'll have you know i've never been to springfield illinois so i said something wrong then idk you can tell me. i'm not perfect lmao.

if you have a preference on shorter chapters vs long let me know! i could cut up some of my chapters and maybe update more frequently but i personally don't mind so if you do i would love to hear your opinions.

on that note, please comment! tell me you hate it! tell me you love it! request a song to be thrown into the mix! i love anything you could possibly tell me. please. <3

3. Kill The Party With Me And Never Go Home

Notes for the Chapter:

hello everyone!

sorry that this chapter took longer than planned, i only today got wifi in the new house so i've been a little off grid without internet. i was hoping to get this up on monday but alas, thursdays are the update day i guess.

to make up for it this chapter is full of action and i think you'll really like it! i hope... it's on the shorter side because when i hit page 33 i figured it was a bit too long and split them. the good news is that i have chapter four already written, i just have to edit it up so next week should be back on schedule for weekly updates.

thanks for being patient!

Mike looked down into his mug, blinking at his blurry reflection in the coffee that swirled and clouded inside the cup. It tasted like shit. He wrinkled his nose and took another sip, looking across the table where El was sandwiched between Lucas and Will, all three of them holding similar beaten-up mugs. It was all they could afford at the diner they were currently in, smushed into a four person booth.

They'd struck out big time.

After leaving the Guitar Center in Springfield, they'd realized the town was far too small to find any sort of gig, the few bars with regular business having been booked for weeks. St. Louis was only an hour and a half south, so they'd headed out on the road as the sun started to set, hoping a bigger city would have better opportunities.

No such luck.

After several hours of inquiring at several bars and a few coffee shops

even, they'd found nothing. Mike refused to use his sister's name again, stating that "we have to build our own reputation and not rely on someone else's" which was a good point but it didn't lessen the disappointing blow. They needed a gig. To practice *and* to make some money. Mike's eyes drifted to El again.

He knew she had money, probably enough to pay for their food, gas, and lodging. But he wasn't going to put that on the table and let the others take advantage of her. And he wasn't going to let her pay their way there either. They needed to prove they were good enough. So here they sat, in a crappy highway diner drinking crappy coffee and sulking silently.

Mike was dying to get El alone. There hadn't been a reason for them split off from the other guys again and he was a little frustrated. After her song back at Guitar Center he was desperate to figure out whether or not he'd imagined it, that unspoken emotion that had poured out of her eyes while she sang. While she sang to *him*.

He shook his head, trying to dislodge the thought. She hadn't been. It was crazy. Just his own mind trying to turn a causal interaction into *something*. Like she was actually interested in him. Not possible. But damn it all if he wasn't going to at least *try* and figure it out.

It didn't help that she and Lucas had made peace. Sort of. Mike had told him what he'd learned about her, the dead parents and mysterious abusive guardian. After hearing her sing, helping with money, and scoring sympathy points with a tragic backstory, Lucas had relaxed his iron grip and decided that maybe she could be more of a help than a hindrance. She'd accepted the smidge of grace with open arms, and now looked more at ease around the boys in general. It was a compromise at least.

The metal bell on the door tinkled as two guys about their age walked in, one looking disgruntled and the other visibly enraged. They thudded into the booth behind Mike with such force that he felt his seat move, and looked irritably over his shoulder. Stupid meatheads.

Dustin, who was sitting next to Mike, humped quietly to himself, but the two guys didn't notice, too busy arguing.

“...dude, just tell everyone you had to move it and have it tomorrow night.”

“I told you, I can’t! Everyone is coming tonight whether or not there’s a keg and a band.”

“Just plug in your iPod, nobody cares that much about music anyways. They just want to get high or drunk or laid.”

“I told Jennifer there was going to be a band. I can’t not have a band, James.”

There was drawn-out sigh.

“You and your damn thing for blondes. I’ve heard she’s not even that great of a lay.”

“Shut the fuck up. I need a band. The party starts in an hour and a half.”

“Well I dunno, man. I know where to get weed, not like... music and shit. I seriously could just plug in my iPod.”

“Your music is shit.”

“Whatever, Troy. You’re just pissed you didn’t find something sooner.”

A waitress interrupted the conversation and both of the guys ordered coffee and a bacon and eggs platter. Mike, who had been listening to the whole thing, was trying to make eye contact with Lucas, to alert him to the opportunity that had just fallen into their laps. Before he had a chance Dustin, who had also been eavesdropping, spun around in the booth.

“Yo, dudes, we’re a band.” He gave them a winning smile. “And we happen to be free tonight.”

The bigger one snorted cynically, taking in Dustin’s Star Wars shirt and brightly colored hat. His eyes drifted to the others, eyes wrinkling in amusement at their appearances. They didn’t exactly exude a “cool guys in a band” vibe.

"You look like a bunch of nerdth to me," he mimicked Dustin's lisp with a snort of laughter and the smile dropped off of Dustin's face.

"Can it, James," the shorter one, who Mike assumed was Troy, turned and looked them up and down with interest, eyes lingering on El, "I mean they may be nerds but nerds can play shit too."

He stuck out his hand to Dustin, who shook it hesitantly, less warmly than he probably would have.

"So? What do you nerds play?"

Mike exchanged a look with Lucas. These guys were jackasses for sure, but it was exposure, and more importantly, a gig. With food. And maybe even beds to sleep on for free. Lucas nodded his head a bit in approval and Mike turned back to Troy, sticking out his hand and raising his eyebrows.

"What do you *want* us to play?"

Troy smiled.

&&&

An hour later they were set up in the living room of one of the largest houses Mike had ever seen in his life. Apparently Troy's parents were stupidly wealthy and currently on a three week vacation to the Bahamas that didn't include their son. Troy was only a year or two older than them, a recent college dropout who worked part time at a gas station and spent the rest of his time getting high and playing his Xbox. But not being invited to the Bahamas was apparently a good enough reason to throw a crazy rager and trash the house, and while Mike questioned the thought process behind that logic, he didn't question their luck in finally catching a break.

So far the house was on the emptier side. A scattering of people hung around on couches or in corners, nursing bottles or red cups. Mike had only been to a few parties back in Hawkins, once or twice to play

but mostly by default. In a town that small you either invite your three friends or everyone, so even the nerds snagged invitations. Another wave of what looked like college-age kids rolled in through the front door, some in swimsuits and clutching a few packs of beer. They looked around in amazement at the massive house and Mike wondered just how many people Troy had invited. No one had bothered to look their way as they finished setting up.

They basically had been told to play everything they knew, as long as it was possible to dance to it. Troy was a definite ass, but he'd agreed to let them eat whatever (there were a few dozen pizzas on the kitchen counter) drink whatever (there was a wild variety of alcohol and drinks) and he was chill if they wanted to crash for the night. Mike had counted at least nine bedrooms during a quick bathroom break and figured they'd be able to snag one or two by the time the party started winding down.

"So, what do you play?"

Mike looked over to where Troy was talking to El, immediately frowning at the sight. He had her backed up almost against the wall, slouching towards her as she leaned away, looking uncomfortable. She'd also run to a bathroom to "freshen up" after the short car ride, and came back out wearing dark red lipstick and smoked-out eyeliner. Her hair had been managed into long, messy pigtails that kept most of it out of her face, and the whole effect, with the new clothes, was pretty stunning. Apparently Troy thought so too.

"I sing mostly but," she glanced over at Lucas, who was fiddling with his amp, "I'm not really in the band. I just... tagged a long."

"Oh, so you're a groupie?" He leaned in closer, looking smug. She grimaced, looking visibly repulsed, and pushed his arm away so she could squeeze out sideways, quickly scurrying away from his grabby hands.

"I'm *not* a groupie," she muttered more to herself as she walked back over to the other guys.

"Whatever you say, Blondie," Troy shrugged, not seeming too upset at her apparent disgust, watching her with hungry eyes as she walked

away.

Mike quickly stepped towards her, feeling like he wanted to punch Troy in the face. El noticed his annoyance and shook her head so he backed up. She had handled it well enough and now plopped onto the couch closest to their setup, crossing her legs and arms almost sulkily. Clearly she didn't like being considered a groupie, and he realized he didn't like the idea of her wandering the party alone, not with creeps like Troy around. He glanced around, knowing couldn't exactly keep an eye on her while he was stuck in the living room playing. He looked over at Lucas and Will.

"You guys, we could have El sing backup, um," he gulped as Lucas looked at him skeptically, "then you wouldn't have to and she knows a lot of music... it would give her something to do."

He crossed his fingers hoping they would take the bait. Will shrugged agreeably, not seeing any harm. He didn't love singing backup anyways, sometimes it would cause him to mess up if he got too distracted. Lucas was the problem child, but as he looked back and forth between the two he slowly began to nod.

"Yeah, sure, she sings pretty well," he snorted at his obvious understatement, "and the two of you sound pretty good together anyways. We could try it out."

Mike realized he hadn't actually asked El if she was okay with it and turned back to where she was sitting.

"Um, I mean, only if you want. You don't have to sing every song, there's probably a few you don't know, but it would be cool..." she was nodding, looking excited, and he didn't bother finishing his sentence.

"Really?" Her eyes were shining but then she hesitated, visibly troubled.

El wanted to sing with them more than anything. But there were so many people here, what if one of them recognized her or her voice? The panic rose in her chest but she quickly swallowed it, trying to rationalize.

She wasn't going to be singing any of Jane Ives' songs, and she was only singing harmony and backup, so it's not like anyone would immediately know just by listening. She glanced down at her clothes. There wasn't a scrap of pink anywhere on her body, no big wavy ponytail and bow, and no fucking veil.

She'd hated that veil more than the hair, but Papa had made her wear it as her "signature", citing that Sia blocked her face with her hair and it added mystery. Later she'd overheard him telling the makeup artist that it was more of an insurance thing, so "if her face ends up as ugly as her attitude, people will still buy whatever her voice is selling". The remark had stung her twelve-year old self more than she let on, but she'd channeled the pain into hatred for everything he was making her become. It turned out to be a blessing, she'd recently realized, since she wasn't instantly recognizable. At the very least there wasn't anything about her that immediately screamed, "I'm Jane Ives!".

Mike glanced at the others as she bit her lip, still thinking, feeling his heart sink a bit. Maybe it was too soon to ask.

"You don't have to, I just thought..." His voice broke her from her thoughts.

"You're sure?" She knew Lucas hadn't been excited about her being any sort of part of them before, but he was giving her a calm, encouraging smile, echoed by the others. *They really do want me.* She felt herself smiling back excitedly.

"Yeah, of course," Mike replied, smiling happily as she perked back up.

She nodded, suddenly shy. "I would love to sing with you."

She got up and Will handed her his microphone and stand, which she grabbed and pulled forward so she was standing next to Mike. His heart sped up a bit at the thought of singing with her again, or maybe her singing to him again. *It's not gonna happen, Wheeler,* he chided, trying to break up that stupid fantasy that he kept replaying in his head. He'd barely known her for an entire day. He was being stupid.

“So what are we playing?”

“Oh...” he entered back into reality at Will’s question, “How about...”

He picked pretty much everything they knew that was upbeat, citing that they didn’t have to transition perfectly as long as they kept playing. It was mostly covers, spanning almost every genre, from classic rock to punk rock to 80s dance to that one Miley Cyrus song they’d had to learn for his sister Holly’s birthday party last year. They had three solid original songs, including Promise, that they figured they’d throw in, and El had nodded, agreeing to just step back during any song she didn’t know.

By the time they’d worked all of that out, there was a shout from the front of the house and what had to be half a dozen fraternities poured into the house, laughing loudly and carrying several kegs to the kitchen and backyard. Everything was suddenly fifty decibels louder, drowning out the quiet music that had been playing while they set up.

“Guess that’s our cue!” Dustin shouted, setting down his beer and picking up his drumsticks.

They’d been warming up a bit, playing out a few songs as practice and seeing which ones El knew and didn’t know. She had an impressive knowledge of music, seeming to know a little of everything and a lot about rock, particularly alt rock, punk rock, and emo rock. Apparently she liked her music loud and angry, and Mike definitely was into that.

Lucas started the bassline for Take Me Out by Franz Ferdinand and soon enough the room was bouncing as people danced and writhed, packing themselves into the large room until they were crowding up against the band. El tucked herself behind Mike seeming a bit uncomfortable, but her voice never wavered even though she was clutching the microphone with white knuckles. They moved into some Nirvana and the room almost exploded, but the energy was infectious and even though he could feel the sweat trickling down his neck, he felt more excited than anxious.

Most of an hour slipped by and then James appeared with his iPod, telling them to take a ten minute break so they could keep playing. The living room filled with the sound of some trap song Mike didn't know, it wasn't his favorite genre, and he slid into the kitchen, looking around desperately for some water. There was every kind of alcohol imaginable and he glared at the huge bottle of Fireball sitting on the counter, finding an empty red cup and filling it from the water dispenser built into the fridge. The floor was sticky and there was a smoky haze that smelled like weed filtering in from one of the open patio doors. Of course there was a pool out back and he dodged two girls in bikinis who giggled and glanced at him as he passed by, ducking into the large, ornate dining room quickly.

Lucas was sitting at the table, chatting up another group of girls while sipping a beer, and Dustin was on the fringes of the conversation, trying to insert himself next to a cute redhead wearing a backwards baseball cap. Mike rolled his eyes and looked around for Will. Usually the two of them stuck together in these situations, neither feeling the need to talk to girls, though for Mike it was more of a socially awkward thing and not a sexual preference. But the younger boy had vanished, like he'd been doing lately, and Mike frowned, a bit worried. Something was up with him, but he couldn't figure out what.

"Mike?"

El appeared next to him, looking overwhelmed. It was too loud to talk and he reached for her wrist to lead her out of the dining room, finding a staircase that led down to a giant theater-looking entertainment room. Some movie with Seth Rogen was being projected onto the huge screen while a group of stupidly high people laughed along, but it was less hectic down here and he leaned against the wall to rest. She leaned next to him, looking less panicked but mildly annoyed.

"I was... I just wanted some water but they were all in the kitchen and holding some guy upside down so he could drink out of a funnel?" Her eyes were confused.

"Oh, a keg stand? Yeah, that sounds about right for this kind of a party..."

“It is?”

“Well... yeah,” he tilted his head, “haven’t you ever been to a party before?”

She shook her head.

“I wasn’t allowed to leave. I could watch TV or movies or listen to music but...” she shrugged, biting her lip, a bit embarrassed, “there wasn’t really anyone to invite me out anyways.”

Another strange set of restrictions from her mysterious guardian. It hit Mike that she was basically telling him she had zero firsthand-experience being a teenager, and that she’d had no friends. He tried to keep any sort of pity off of his face.

“Well, this a party,” he gestured around like an overly-enthusiastic game show assistant, hoping to make her laugh. “It’s not super fun unless you’re drunk or high or trying to meet people, so basically I hate everything about them,” he deadpanned. She cracked a half smile and he claimed it as a victory. “But honestly it’s a little overrated.” He remembered what she’d said about being thirsty and offered her his cup, “did you still want water?”

She took it gratefully and he glanced at his watch, realizing they only had a few more minutes before they needed to head back upstairs and start playing again. Two random girls approached them, focused on El. They looked pretty drunk.

“Hiiiii, we were wondering, what’s your lipstick? It’s sooooo badass like you pull it off so well and your hair is amazing!” one of them said, reaching out and tenderly stroking El’s long blonde pigtail like it was a kitten.

El looked confused and glanced at Mike, who was trying not to laugh. Drunk girls, like these ones, were the most harmless and fun people to observe at parties. They gathered and would squeal over makeup or a video of puppies or whatever the hell caught their attention. It was an innocent kind of excitement that was just a joy to watch, and seeing El experience it for the first time was absolutely hysterical. It took her a minute but soon enough she was smiling hesitantly and

pulling out her tube of lipstick as the two girls chattered excitedly.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Will, and he zoned out of the conversation as he observed his friend. The brown-haired boy was slouching on a couch talking to an intimidatingly beautiful blonde girl, who kept laughing and reaching over to touch his arm. Mike snorted, knowing she wasn't about to get anywhere with that. Will still had that strange green-ish hue, his face pale and clammy, like he had a fever or something. Mike turned to El, to excuse himself to go talk to Will, but paused as he reentered the conversation. El looked tense and almost as sickly as Will.

Woah, what did I miss? Why does she look like she wants to throw up?

“...if you had a veil you would look *just* like Jane, and weren’t you just singing upstairs? Maybe you’re long lost twins! Just look at your hair!” The shorter drunk girl was spouting excitedly, almost bouncing.

“Um,” El was clearly uncomfortable with whatever they were saying and Mike glanced at his watch, realizing they needed to get back upstairs anyways.

“Sorry, uh, ladies, but we’ve gotta go...” he gently grabbed her wrist again and tugged her away, towards Will, figuring they’d grab him too. Will saw them coming and stood, leaving the attractive girl with an apologetic smile. They hurried back up the stairs and found Dustin in the kitchen, his arm around the redhead, who he left a lot more reluctantly. Lucas was already back in the living room sliding the strap of his bass back over his shoulder.

“About time you guys showed up,” he gestured to the other side of the room where Troy was hunched over the stereo, “the asshole was getting ready to send out a search party.”

They all went back to their posts, but Mike noticed El still looked visibly shaken, and when they started back up with Mr. Brightside, a typical crowd favorite, she missed most of the harmonies. He wanted to ask what was up but they wouldn’t get their next break for another hour.

The next song was the original, Promise, so she stepped back as expected, seeming to vanish into the crowd. Mike let himself fall into his music, encouraged as the crowd continued to dance instead of dropping the unfamiliar song. It helped that most of them were drunk or high or both, but he felt satisfied with what he'd written. When they started up Weezer's Beverly Hills, which made the whole room vibrate, he glanced over his shoulder towards El. She wasn't there. He messed up the next three chords and almost missed the next line of the song as a bolt of fear shot through him. *Did she just miss the beginning of the song? She's probably coming back now, calm down*, he tried to tell himself as he peered frantically through the sea of thrashing bodies, trying to catch a glimpse of blonde pigtails.

She didn't appear during Killing in the Name, or the three songs after either. Lucas sidled up to Mike and yelled, "Where the hell did El go!?" but Mike just shrugged, not having an answer. The panic was welling up and he barely made it through the next half hour, almost sagging in relief when Troy appeared again and signaled for them to cut. He was kind of surprised that they were even allowed to have breaks, but he wasn't going to complain.

"I'm going to go look for El, can you help?" He yelled to Lucas. Dustin had somehow reunited with the redhead and disappeared, but Will and Lucas were still there and they both nodded before splitting up. He asked a few of the more sober-looking people if anyone of them had seen her and one girl said she saw her go upstairs about half an hour ago holding a bag. He thanked her and almost tripped while rushing up the stairs.

He made the mistake of not knocking on the first door, barging in on two people in the middle of something rather intimate, and he immediately reversed and shut the door with a shouted apology. The next one he made sure to knock, getting some yelled insults in return. There were at least five bedrooms and two different bathrooms, and he reached the first bathroom, sighing at the closed door before knocking frantically. There was no answer, but he thought he heard muffled crying and he pressed his ear to the wood.

"Hey, anyone in here?" Still no answer. "Um, are you okay? Do you need help?"

He felt bad disturbing whoever was in there, but at the same time if they were crying maybe there was a way he could help.

“Go away,” came the answer and he sighed.

“I’m sorry, I just... my name is Mike and I was looking for someone but if you need some help I could—”

“Mike?”

He stood up straighter. It was El. Why had she locked herself in the bathroom? And why was she crying? A million scenarios flashed through his mind as he assumed the worst.

“El?! Oh my god, are you okay? Did something happen?” he rapped the door with his knuckles a few times, “did someone... are you hurt?”

There was a silence that seemed to stretch on for an eternity.

“No... I’m fine,” came the quiet answer.

He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding feeling relieved.

“Well... can I come in then?”

“No.” A pause. “Not... not yet.”

Behind him someone had come up the stairs and he realized it was Lucas and Will, who were followed by that gorgeous blonde from before. They all looked worried and walked towards him.

“Did you find her?” Will asked.

Mike pointed at the door, letting out a sigh.

“She was crying, but I don’t know what’s wrong. She won’t let me in...”

“Shit, do you think she’s hurt?”

“I asked and she said no but... I don’t know, Lucas.”

"Well we're supposed to be back down there in five, dude, you need to figure something out or Troy is going to have our asses."

From behind them the blonde girl, who Mike assumed was still trying to attach herself to Will, spoke up, looking devious.

"Oh, I could go and distract Troy until you can get her out," she waved at Mike with a friendly smile. "I'm Jennifer by the way."

"Um, hi, I'm Mike. If you could do that... that would be so awesome."

"Consider it done," she flashed another smile and headed back downstairs.

Lucas gave Will a sidelong look.

"How in the hell do you get the hottest chicks to talk to you when you don't even like women?"

Will shrugged, allowing himself to look a little smug. "Well I don't ogle them for starters but," he turned back to Mike, "that's not what's important. Do you want our help or..."

Behind him the lock clicked and the door opened a crack, surprising all three of them. Mike took a step forward, placing his hand on the knob.

"Um, El, is it... can we come in now?"

"I guess."

With the other two behind him he carefully pushed the door open. He hadn't known what to expect other than a crying El, but the sight that greeted him made his jaw drop.

She was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, holding a pair of scissors loosely in her hand and looking despondent. Apparently she'd grabbed the bag of hair supplies she'd bought at Goodwill before she'd come upstairs. Her blonde hair was laying in swathes all over the tiled floor, looking like banks of golden snow. There were cloudy strands of it everywhere, all across the counter and in the sink, where

the electric razor lay, still buzzing softly.

Her head was bare, buzzed almost the scalp, leaving a short layer of brunette fuzz that covered her head like a cap. She was fixated on her reflection in the mirror, but when they walked in she looked up at them with red, tear-stained eyes.

“I-I... didn’t mean to.”

All three boys were frozen. Mike was trying to figure out what to say, resisting the urge to comment on her new appearance, trying to process exactly what she’d done to herself. He licked his lips and opened his mouth to say something, anything, but Will beat him to it.

“Wow, El, you look so *badass*,” he said, voice full of admiration.

It was somehow the right thing to say and her eyes widened.

“I’m not... ugly?”

She seemed confused, having already convinced herself that she was hideous.

“You’re not ugly,” Mike blurted out, “like you looked good with the hair but now you look...” He tried to find a word that could accurately describe her but failed and went with something overly simple instead. “Pretty.”

He wasn’t lying, at least not entirely. It was definitely a shock. He’d been used to the way her hair tumbled down her back and flowed over her shoulders, but without it her facial features were more defined, her tall neck and strong jawline, her pouty lips and high cheekbones framed by her delicate brows. Her eyes looked even bigger, drowning him in the pained misery that pooled in them. It was different, but it was a *good* different.

“Pretty?” she whispered, a flicker of hope lighting her eyes.

“Yeah, pretty! Really pretty,” he gulped.

A new, foreign, fluttery feeling settled in her stomach and she had the sudden urge to hug him, which she quickly squelched. She settled

for smiling instead, relief crashing over her like a wave, washing away the insecurity that had been burning in her mind. It wasn't that she *needed* others' opinions, she was fairly self-assured, but hearing Mike say that he still thought she was pretty made her feel strangely warm. She bit her lip and looked down, suddenly shy.

Will nudged Lucas, who had been silent so far, and he shut his gaping mouth. It wouldn't hurt to try and make her feel better.

"It looks pretty sick," he offered a smile, even though it seemed a bit strained, "and I don't bullshit like these two do, so you can believe me."

"Hey!" Mike and Will protested at the same time.

She smiled, this one reaching her eyes, and almost laughed.

"Um, thanks," she slowly stood up, walking towards her reflection, assessing herself, "I guess it's... okay." She wasn't quite convinced that it looked good, but their approval and compliments made her feel empowered in a way. She really did feel more... free. It was a relief, not just emotionally but because she hoped she would be even less recognizable.

She frowned, noticing the mascara that had trailed down her face from her tears, and grabbed a tissue to wipe the black streaks off her cheeks. Blinking a few times, she reached for the pocket of her denim jacket and pulled out the tube of lipstick, uncapping it and applying the color to her faded lips. It made the whole "badass" effect even stronger and she smiled softly at her new appearance. She could get used to this.

Mike had never seen anyone look so effortlessly cool and he gulped again, still stunned by the sudden transformation of the shy girl he had met drinking Shirley Temples at a bar to this... punk rock *goddess*.

Lucas and Will both looked relieved that she was okay, even though Lucas seemed annoyed too, and they decided to head back downstairs. Mike didn't notice them leave, still watching El, who was now reapplying her eyeliner, smudging the black line into a smokey

ring that made her eyes pop even more. He felt the sudden urge to tell her just how amazing she looked.

“Hey, El?”

She finished touching up her makeup and turned to where he was still standing in the doorway. He took a step closer at the same time she did and they almost bumped into each other. Her skirt brushed against his leg and he was close enough to notice she'd missed a mascara smudge.

“Hey, you have a...” he reached out without thinking and wiped it off of her cheek carefully. She blinked at his touch but didn't seem frightened, watching his face as he gently cleaned the makeup off of her. He finished and let his hand drop, but neither of them moved away.

“Um,” his mouth went dry as he realized how close they were, “sorry, uh, I was just thinking...”

“Yeah?” Her breath caught in her throat.

“Yeah, just that...” the words slipped from his mind and he felt himself leaning in closer to her, his dark eyes staring into her bright ones. She seemed to share his thought, her head tilting up, one of her hands resting on his chest as she leaned even closer. He glanced at her lips, feeling her breath on his face. Her lipstick smelled sweet, like chemical violets, and he closed his eyes, letting everything else fade away.

“GUYS!”

The two of them shot apart like they'd been electrocuted, and Mike whipped around to see Dustin standing in the doorway, panting and looking scared. His eyes drifted to El's head and his face formed a silent question, but he quickly shook the question away and looked back at Mike.

“It's Will!” The panic in his voice caught their attention. “Troy's accusing him of hitting on his girlfriend or something, I don't even know, but he's about to knock Will's lights out and James grabbed

Lucas before he could—”

Mike didn't wait for Dustin to finish, running out of the bathroom and nearly sliding down the stairs, El hot on his heels. They followed the dramatic shouting into the kitchen, where a circle had formed around a clearly inebriated Troy and Will. Jennifer was standing at Troy's side, screaming at him and pushing him, trying to distract him from his prey, but he shoved her away so roughly she fell onto her butt. Mike elbowed his way through the crowd, managing to get to the center and step out in front of Will.

“Troy! What the hell's your problem?” he yelled, “Leave Will alone, he didn't do anything!”

Troy was past reasoning, his hands balled into fists.

“This son of a bitch was hitting on my girl,” he yelled back.

“No I wasn't,” Will piped up, sounding tired, “I told you already, I'm not interested in her.”

“Like hell!” Troy swung but Will dodged pretty easily, “you've been chatting her up every goddamn break!”

“Troy, I'm serious, I wasn't!”

“Fucking fight me, you pussy!”

The older guy swung again, more accurately this time, and Will barely dodged this one. Mike stepped forward, trying to get in front of his friend and Troy squared up again.

“You wanna fight, Skinny Boy? Fine! Defend your boyfriend, you faggot!”

His fist was heading straight for Mike's face and Mike tensed and shut his eyes, waiting for the blow to land. Instead he felt two smaller hands shove him from his right side, pushing him out of the way. He opened his eyes in time to see the fist *just* miss him, and then looked over to see El, who was considerably smaller than Troy, step in front of the bully as he squared up again.

“El, no!”

He barely got the words out before he watched, in stunned amazement, as she wound her arm back, her feet in perfect position, her posture tight, putting the entire force of her body behind her fist as she smashed it across Troy’s face. There was a wet, sickening crunch and immediately bright, red blood spurted out of his nose. He yelled, reaching up to grab his face, his hands quickly staining crimson. She grimaced and shook out her fist, wincing at the pain that flared all the way up her wrist. She didn’t have time to think about it as James, who had been on the edges of the circle, holding Lucas back, dropped his prisoner and leapt forward, charging her with a roar. She dodged nimbly to the side before spinning back around to face him, her leg moving through the air like lightning and striking James forcefully in the middle of his chest, knocking the air from his lungs with the force of her kick. He fell back onto the ground gasping and she glared, still in a fighting stance, daring either of them to try again.

It was dead quiet, everyone who had witnessed the takedown stunned into silence. Then a cheer went up from the surrounding crowd, nearly vibrating the house. Apparently Troy wasn’t all that popular. El relaxed her stance and backed up a bit, uneasy with so many eyes staring at her.

“Oh my god,” Mike croaked, unable to understand how she’d suddenly become even more attractive.

“Holy shit!” whooped Dustin at the same time.

She looked back at them, visibly worried, but Dustin gave her a thumb’s up. Mike just nodded slowly, amazed and speechless.

“Get out.”

Troy’s voice was nasally, he was still clutching his nose, but his eyes were filled with fiery hatred and pain-induced tears as he pointed towards the front of the house.

“Take your shit and get the FUCK out of my HOUSE!”

They didn't need to be told twice, all five scrabbling out of the kitchen and into the living room, grabbing their equipment and instruments and running from the house, quickly shoving everything into the van in record time. Within minutes Lucas was reversing out of the driveway, driving down the private lane and out of the fancy neighborhood.

Mike had ended up in the backseat this time, next to El, but he turned and watched as the lights and sounds of the party house faded into the darkness behind them.

So much for that.

Notes for the Chapter:

this was such a fun chapter. did you catch the surprise cameo? they might just pop up again later on. ;)

again if there's a song you want me to throw in, i'd love to hear! they've had quite the musical journey, so honestly i could probably have them play just about anything.

comments are treasured and beloved. xx

-g

4. Tongue-Tied And Oh So Squeamish

Notes for the Chapter:

hello again!

this chapter isn't quite as exciting as the last one, but it's longer to try and compensate. i know you guys like the longer chapters. C:

i know the mileven is kind of slow burn, but i promise it will be worth it in the end.

As the van traveled out of the wealthy neighborhood and towards one of the main roads, El sat in the back, massaging her knuckles, which were still throbbing after the epic punch. She winced, realizing they were bleeding and looked around for something to wipe the blood off. Troy's face had been painfully abrasive.

Mike, who had ended up sitting next to her, noticed, and reached down to pull an old first aid kit out from under the passenger seat. He silently pressed some questionable-looking gauze onto her hand to help stop the bleeding, pulling out a tube of Neosporin and an odd collection of band aids. His hands were rough and callused, she'd noticed that before, but he was painstakingly gentle as he carefully applied a mishmash of Hello Kitty, Star Wars, and neon band aids to her scrapes, holding her hand like she would break. She watched his face as he worked, admiring the way his thin brows furrowed and his lips gaped open slightly as he concentrated. She let her mind wander back to the moment when she'd been close enough to count every freckle on his pale face.

He'd almost kissed her in the bathroom, and remembering it filled her stomach with a strange sort of shivery excitement she couldn't identify. Unless they were... butterflies? That was definitely new, a feeling she'd only ever sang about in tacky love songs. She'd never been kissed before either, and she didn't know what to expect, but there was a definite feeling of disappointment at the memory of being interrupted.

She wanted him to kiss her, and the realization flooded through her like a silvery wash of cool rain.

“There, you’re all patched up,” he said, looking up from her hand for the first time and meeting her eyes. This time she was the one who glanced at his lips, her bandaged hand still resting gently in his palm.

“So when did El become a total badass?” Dustin interrupted, popping up from the seat behind them. “Like, the shaved head and the motherfucking death punch? What was that?”

She flopped back into her seat and took her hand back, feeling her cheeks warm, trying to focus on an explanation and not the newfound emotion that shivered through her every time she looked at Mike. She glanced down at her colorful, band aid-encrusted hand.

“I’ve had a kickboxing instructor since I was twelve,” she wiggled her fingers experimentally, wincing a bit, “I was required to have an exercise program so I picked that one. And I started Taekwondo last year.”

“You know *Taekwondo* ?” Dustin asked, voice full of admiration.

“Obviously, you dumbass, did you see the way she took down James with that kick?” Lucas was in driver’s seat as usual, but even he allowed himself to sound impressed. “What... what was that called, El?”

“Jump reverse hook. The punch was just a cross hit.” She seemed embarrassed but also a little proud. “I could teach you... if you want.”

“God, please, yes ,” Dustin begged.

Mike was still amazed. He kept replaying the punch in his mind, the way her fist moved with such precise certainty. And now she was chatting with Dustin about kickboxing stances like they’d been friends for years. She hadn’t talked this much... at all so far. It was like shaving her head had unleashed this whole other side of her, and it was confident and strong and downright sexy . He put his head into

his hands and stifled a groan. And he'd almost kissed her. He'd almost ruined it.

His self-deprecation party was interrupted by a quiet voice.

"I'm sorry, guys."

It was Will, who was up front with Lucas. They'd kind of all just dove into the van so they weren't in their usual places. He sounded tired and didn't bother turning around to talk, looking out the window with guilty eyes instead.

"I shouldn't have talked to that girl..." he slumped down further, sounding ashamed, "now we have no place to stay."

"It's fine, Will. Troy overreacted like a crazy asshole. You can talk to whoever, I mean, it's not like you were actually hitting on her," Mike tried to reason with their youngest friend. Will just sighed, not so easily appeased.

Lucas glanced back in the mirror.

"He's right though, I'm not sure where to head now. Did you guys want to stay the night in the van or try to find somewhere to crash?" He paused and bit his lip. "I'm not sure what we can afford..."

"Just drive for a bit, maybe we can find something cheaper further out?"

Lucas nodded, figuring that wasn't the worst idea, and merged back onto the interstate that ran through the large city, heading west. Dustin kept asking questions about punches and El tried to answer the less ridiculous ones while Mike listened silently. He was still busy pondering earlier, that split second in the bathroom, convinced that he'd almost ruined his already tentative friendship with her by nearly kissing her. But he felt the pressure of her hand on his chest as she leaned closer and he wondered if he was as crazy as he thought. He turned to her, catching the last bit of their conversation, which had changed.

"Yeah, her name's Max, she just texted me to ask about you, 'that badass girl with the shaved head who punched the fuck outta Troy',"

Dustin was reading something off of his phone to El, “we were making out before the fight started, but luckily I got her number earlier.”

“Making out...“ El looked thoughtful. She’d heard the term before but had never experienced it herself. “That’s kissing, right?”

“Yeah, you know, like,” he turned his back to her, wrapping his arms around himself and running his hands up and down his waist, making gross, wet sounds. He turned back around, proud of his amazing impression. “Like, really good kissing and... stuff.”

“Oh,” she blinked, a bit traumatized.

“You’ve kissed someone before, right?” Dustin asked.

Her eyes widened as her face turned pink, giving away her innocence, and he nearly gasped, eyes flicking between her and Mike. He hadn’t forgotten what he’d almost walked in on earlier, and a wicked grin twisted his lips. *They* could try and pretend it hadn’t happened but there was no reason why he had to. Might as well have some fun with it. He patted El’s shoulder reassuringly, trying to look sincere.

“Well, hey, I mean, if you ever need help, I’d be happy to teach you.”

She gaped at him, eyes nearly bugging right out of her head, utterly speechless at his offer. *Is he serious?* She couldn’t tell.

Lucas let out loud snort of laughter from up front and Will joined him, both chuckling at their friend’s sense of humor. Mike felt a bolt of a red-hot jealousy but quickly swallowed it, knowing that one, Dustin didn’t mean it and was just making a terrible joke at El’s expense, and two, if he acted like he cared too much they would give him so much shit. He tried to be nonchalant, rolling his eyes.

“He’s just kidding, El.” He reached back and gave Dustin a friendly shove that was a little harder than usual. “Don’t take him seriously... like, ever.”

Dustin gave her a cheeky grin before he started laughing too and she felt her face get even hotter as she realized she’d been fooled. *Of*

course he isn't going to teach you to kiss, she scolded herself, that's not a normal thing people do...

"I-I knew that," she said, trying to ignore how stupid she suddenly felt.

She forced out a laugh and then cringed out how fake it sounded, turning to gaze out the window at the passing scenery instead of look at Dustin or Mike or *anyone* that had *anything* to do with *kissing*. She'd barely just come to terms with the idea of wanting to kiss someone, the last thing she needed was to be reminded *just* how little experience she had in that department. She tried to take her mind off it by counting the lit-up, brightly colored fast food signs that were flying by outside.

A tense awkwardness filled the car as Mike grappled for some scrap of conversation that didn't include kissing or laughing or would give away just how uncomfortable he felt. Clearly the joke had embarrassed El, even though Dustin hadn't meant any real harm. But it had thrown Mike off enough that he couldn't think of a single thing to say that would make her feel better. Instead he focused on the torn edge of his khaki cargo shorts, taking his frustration out on the already shredded hem.

Beside him El, who had been very deliberately looking out the window, let out a sudden, loud gasp and pointed to a bright yellow sign up ahead.

"Waffle House!" she yelped, pressing herself against the glass.

Mike startled a bit, but leaned over to look out of her window, his chin brushing against her shoulder, the smell of her perfume almost distracting him. He blinked and focused on where she was pointing. Sure enough, there it was, the big blocky neon sign spelling out the sacred name.

"Lucas! Pull over!" he barked.

"What?!"

"Take this exit... now!"

“But we’re almost past it!”

“Just do it!”

Lucas swerved to change lanes, barely making the exit, the back tire skidding off of the pavement and onto the grass. The entire van swayed as they fishtailed for a second. Lucas had to slam the breaks before they got too close to the stoplight that blinked at the top of the bridge, their bumper coming dangerously close to the unassuming Honda in front of them. They all let out a breath they’d been holding and then El burst into giggles, which Mike quickly joined.

Lucas whipped around, glaring at them.

“What the *hell* was that?!”

The two were rolling in their seat, eyes filled with tears as they gasped for air between laughs. Dustin was grinning despite not getting the joke and he gave Lucas an unsure shrug. El managed to calm herself first, pointing out her window again.

“There’s a Waffle House,” she told him, snorting out another laugh.

“Obviously!”

“We... we have to go,” Mike butted in, still gasping, “I promised her we’d go.”

“What *haven’t* you promised her, Jesus...” the light turned green and he turned left, heading across the overpass towards the 24/7 breakfast establishment, “just don’t make me almost commit vehicular manslaughter again, okay?”

“Sorry,” they chorused, still giggly.

The awkwardness had broken, much to Mike’s relief, and as they pulled into the parking lot of the mostly-empty Waffle House, El looked visibly excited.

“So I can get... waffles?”

“Yeah! Well, they have eggs and hash browns too, but I mean... it’s

called *Waffle* House for a reason,” Mike explained, looking equally excited.

“Have you never had a waffle, El?” Will, who had been mostly quiet so far, asked from the front, turning around.

“Um, not since I was really little. They were yellow ones... you put them in the toaster?”

They’d started climbing out of the van and El slid out behind Mike, making sure to grab her backpack.

“Oh, Eggos?” Dustin piped up.

She scrunched up her face in thought as an image of a bright yellow box with the word “Eggo” written across the front in red, cursive script flashed into her mind. A forgotten memory appeared from the fog that was her childhood, of her and her mom eating the frozen waffles plain, right out of the toaster while they were still warm. It hit her, that she couldn’t remember her mom’s face anymore and she felt heart clench painfully as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Yeah,” she murmured, wiping at her nose to hide a sudden sniffle, “Eggos.”

“Way to go, Dustin, you made her sad. Stop asking stupid questions,” Lucas shoved his curly-haired friend.

“Sorry, El,” Dustin frowned at her tears, feeling bad, but then smiled mischievously and snuck around behind her, scooping her up in his arms before she could protest and letting out a whoop. “C’mon guys! Let’s go get the lady her waffles!”

He took off running across the parking lot, leaving the others fairly stunned. El was shrieking and flailing, but she was smiling, and Mike hurried after them, shaking his head. He was glad that his friends seemed to be accepting her a bit more, figuring her heroic punch hadn’t hurt her standing in their eyes. Even Lucas had softened, becoming less reluctant and more protective, like he was with all of his friends.

“Don’t try and carry her into the building, you’ll knock her head—

what did I just say?!" Lucas fussed, worryingly coming up next to them and looking El over like he was a mother hen and she was his chick.

Dustin carefully set her down as she rubbed the side of her head that had hit the door frame, but she was still smiling, the romp across the parking lot successfully lifting her spirits.

They crowded into the restaurant and Mike felt his stomach drop. The place was quite frankly, *disgusting*.

When he'd mentioned Waffle House earlier it had been from a memory of one of the few road trips his family had taken, that one being specifically to the Smoky Mountains. They'd driven through Tennessee and stopped at several Waffle Houses and it had been pretty good. Or at least it had been in the mind of a hungry, stir-crazy eleven-year old. Now he was thinking he might have made a mistake praising it so highly to El.

The floor was sticky, and not just sticky like maybe someone had spilled something, but sticky like it hadn't been mopped in months. Maybe years. The air smelled like bacon grease and old coffee grounds, and as they tried to find one red and brown booth that wasn't dirty, he noticed a group of very, very drunk college students in one corner. An old man in a crop top and camo shorts sat at the counter. Every single table had crumbs on it but he found one that didn't have mysterious liquid on the seat and slid into the booth. Dustin made sure to shove El in next to Mike with a cheeky grin, but then grimaced as he set his elbows on the greasy surface of the table.

"Why did we have to come here again?" He grumped. "This place is gross even by my standards... which are pretty low."

Mike was too busy watching El to answer him. She seemed captivated by, well, everything, not complaining about the gross lack of sanitation or the odd assembly of clientele. Her eyes were almost shining as an older waitress with a name tag that read "Flo" appeared, handing them menus and listing off the special. He turned to El as she pored over the coffee-stained menu, wincing as her elbow dug into his ribs but not complaining at her closeness. She leaned towards him as she shifted in the booth to get more comfortable, her

knee resting against his under the table. He tried to focus on the menu and not on the fact that they were touching.

“So, um, what kind of waffles do you want?” he gulped, pointing at the menu, “there’s chocolate chip, strawberry, peanut butter...”

“Um... what do you like?” she asked, face almost glowing with excitement.

He tried his best to hide the disgust that was roiling in his stomach. His hand bumped some gum stuck under the table and he winced as he shifted away. There was no place to put his arm so he rested it behind her on the back of the booth seat, hoping the guys wouldn’t notice and try and give him shit.

“Well, I like... all of them,” he lied guiltily before glancing across the table at Dustin, eyes begging for help, “but, um, chocolate chip is a good place to start, right?”

“Yeah, can’t go wrong there,” Dustin agreed amicably as he tried to casually wipe the leftover table grease onto his shorts.

El placed her order when the waitress came back, but frowned as she noticed that none of the boys were ordering. It had been almost four hours since the pizza at Troy’s, they had to be at least a little hungry.

“Don’t you want food?” she asked, surprised that they genuinely did not seem interested in the menu.

The four exchanged glances, not wanting to tell her that they were utterly grossed out by the place. Clearly she was enamored with the crusty house of greasy breakfast food and none of them were heartless enough to ruin the spell. Lucas gave Mike a look that said “you got us into this, you get to handle it now” and with a sigh the taller boy awkwardly tried to make up an excuse.

“We, uh, don’t have that much money, El,” he shrugged, figuring it wasn’t untrue, “we still have to pay for gas from here to Nebraska... and back. And for places to sleep. And if anything breaks down we’ll have to pay for that too...”

She blinked. It hadn’t occurred to her that they were *that* broke. The

past ten years of her life she'd never had to worry about money. Sure, she wasn't allowed certain foods or clothing because it would "disrupt her image", but never because she couldn't *afford* it. It was a foreign idea, worrying about how much something cost, and she tried to remember that last time she'd even thought about expense.

Instead, a vivid memory of when she'd been nominated for the Best New Artist Grammy two years ago came to her mind. When Papa had insisted she wear several thousand dollars worth of diamonds with a tight, short, pink Versace dress as she stalked angrily across the red carpet. She hadn't wanted to go at all, knowing the music she was being honored for was garbage and didn't deserve any sort of award. But he'd told her if she didn't he would cancel their upcoming trip to Indianapolis, which was one of the few places she actually liked to go. She didn't win the award and he'd ended up canceling it anyways, citing that maybe if she tried harder to be "likable" she might have actually had a shot. It was the same night she'd tried to run away the first time.

Between the Alexander McQueen veil and the Cartier diamonds, she'd been coated in enough money back then to feed all five of them for the next several years. And she'd hated every second of it, eschewing the fancy food and expensive goodie bags. Thinking back now she felt ashamed at taking the financial security of even one night for granted.

She looked around the circle of boys, who were still watching her expectantly and hoping she'd take the bait. They were completely unaware of what they'd just opened up in El's heart and she felt herself nodding slowly. These were her friends now, they'd taken her in and let her sing with them and made her feel better when she was sad. She wanted to help them, she *needed* to help them, so she pulled her backpack out of her lap and thunked it onto the middle of the table.

"I have money, so... I'll buy food from now on, okay? And..." she remembered the dilemma of sleeping in the van and nodded more earnestly, "and places to sleep. So we can make it to Nebraska."

After that she knew she'd have to leave them. It was too dangerous to stay and even though she didn't have an exact destination in mind,

she knew she needed head west and get as far away from Indiana as possible. Her eyes flicked towards Mike and she ignored the pang that suddenly made it hard to breathe. It was the painful realization that she didn't want to leave them. She could be happy sitting in the back of the van with the windows down, singing along to the radio as Dustin tapped out the rhythm behind her and Lucas swore at traffic as Will smiled and rolled his eyes. And Mike sitting next to her—

She derailed that train of thought before it could turn into an impossible fantasy. There was no way she could stay, she'd known that from the beginning when she'd first accepted the offer. It would only hurt to dwell on an unclaimable future, one that could only cause more harm. The best thing she could do was leave them behind, to keep herself *and* them safe from the pain that had haunted her footsteps since she was a child.

But for now she could help them reach their destination, help the kind strangers who had taken her so completely in. And she had plenty of money, for a while at least, so staying with them for the next few days would give her time to figure out her next move. The anxiety of the unknown rose up in her chest and she quickly squelched it, returning from her thoughts to glance around the table and see what they thought of her offer.

It was quiet as they stared at her, unsure of what she meant by having money. Mike finally broke the silence.

“Um, El, it’s okay we don’t need mo—”

“How much do you have?” Lucas interrupted, looking interested. “You gave me forty bucks for the hotel last night... that was pretty good.”

“Lucas, no we’re not going to—” Mike started again.

“I haven’t actually counted but, um,” El ignored Mike, reaching out to unzip the backpack on the table and scoot it towards Lucas, “I think it’s enough.”

Lucas looked into the bag and his eyes widened, eyebrows shooting up his forehead. Dustin, who was sitting next to him, glanced inside

too and almost choked.

“Holy shit!” He looked up at El, then back down at the bag, then up at her again. “Holy *shit*, El! You didn’t tell us you were *loaded!* There’s gotta be like ten thous—”

“Shut it, Dustin!” Lucas hissed, looking around suspiciously at the mostly empty restaurant.

The drunk college students were too busy building a salt and pepper shaker tower to notice, but the old homeless guy at the counter had looked over at the outburst. Lucas gave him a winning smile and a wave and the old guy looked away again. Will was leaning across the table, wanting to peek into the bag, but Lucas was too busy sticking his hand in and silently counting the stacks of blue Benjamins and odd assortment of other bills messily scattered on top. When he finished his eyebrows had traveled up even further and he gave El an unbelieving stare.

“You have...” he lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned across the table, trying not to be overheard, “you have over twenty thousand dollars in here, El.” He looked impressed but also fiercely suspicious, the acceptance he’d offered to her earlier melting away. “Did you steal this? Is it drug money?”

“Wha—” her head snapped over to look at him, shocked, “*what?* ”

Mike immediately came to her defense, looking especially pissed as he glared at Lucas.

“*Really* , Lucas?! Are you seriously accusing her of being a drug pusher or something?!” His voice crescendoed higher and Lucas shushed him, suddenly furious.

He opened his mouth to let out an angry retort but didn’t get the chance to reply because Flo, the waitress, came back with El’s waffles. She glanced around the tense circle and then set the plate down with a sigh. “Can I get you kids anything else?”

“Yeah, I’ll have a steak and eggs combo with a side of peanut butter waffles,” Dustin piped up, looking down at the menu, “and I’ll take

my hash browns all the way. Oh! And a glass of orange juice.” He noticed the others were staring at him and he shrugged innocently. “What? El said she was buying, and I know this place is fucking gross as shit, but I’m friggin’ *starving* .”

Flo looked unimpressed by his entire spiel. “Is that all?”

“Yeah, for now,” Dustin grinned at her and she turned and left again.

The chocolate chip waffles were steaming and El felt her stomach rumble. But she couldn’t eat, not until she’d settled this money thing, which both Lucas and Mike were scolding Dustin about as the curly-haired boy protested. It was turning more and more into an actual dispute between the two and Will looked on wearily, occasionally glancing down at his phone as if waiting for something.

“She offered!” Dustin protested again.

“You can’t just take advantage of her like that, Dustin, come on!” Mike was saying.

“Yeah, for all we know that’s drug money or something—” Lucas started.

“What did you—It’s not drug money, Lucas! Why do you *think* that!?”

“Well, how the hell else did she get it? She had to have stolen it!”

“That’s so fucking messed up, I can’t believe you’re accusing her of stealing *and* being a drug lord!?”

“I didn’t say she was a *drug lord*, that’s not even the point—”

“So... should I not let her buy me food with it because it’s *drug* money?” Dustin interrupted dryly.

Both Lucas and Mike glared at him.

“Shut up!” They said at the same time, then turned back to each other, still fiery.

“What is your goddamn *problem*, Lucas? I thought you were over her

coming along with us!” Mike shouted.

“Oh, so you’re okay with her just *buying* everyone’s friendship? Pretty sure that’s just selling out, that thing you tell us we should never ever let us do!”

“*Buying* friendship?! That doesn’t even make sense!” Mike threw his hands into the air, exasperated and confused as to what any of that had to do with El. “And we don’t need to sell out, we’re a good band!”

“Is that why we’ve been so fucking successful the past six and a half years?!” Lucas shot back.

“It’s not about success it’s—”

“STOP IT!” El shrieked abruptly, slamming her hands onto the table and causing all of the dishes to clatter. At the same time Will’s phone buzzed, the unexpected vibration causing them all to jump in surprise. Her eyes were wide. “Stop fighting! Please!”

She looked near tears, clutching herself tightly like she was afraid she’d fall apart if she didn’t. This wasn’t what she had wanted.

All four boys froze, turning to look at her. Before she could say anything Will scooted out of the booth, looking clammy and upset.

“I’m going outside for some air,” he was almost shaking, looking between his two angry friends, “but you guys need to figure this out, because I’m tired of the fighting too.”

He vanished out the door before they could say anything and Lucas looked even more annoyed, not liking that they’d upset Will. They were all a little extra protective of their youngest friend, especially Lucas.

“Great, now you pissed Will off,” he told Mike, throwing his hands into the air.

“I pissed him off?! You’re the one yelling about drugs and stealing!”

“Knock it off, you idiots!” Dustin interjected and they both paused to

glare at him again, “it’s both of your faults and you know it, so shut up before El has to punch your lights out!”

The waitress reappeared, holding Dustin’s food. She glanced between the teens and sighed heavily as she set the plates down.

“If you’re going to get physical, please take it off the property. I had to call the police yesterday and I don’t really want to make them come back so soon,” she looked tired, like she’d seen more working at that Waffle House than most of her life.

“S-Sorry,” Mike mumbled, looking rightly ashamed.

“We’re not... it won’t get physical,” Lucas promised.

“Thanks,” she said, looking unconvinced but leaving them again.

It was quiet, finally, with the exception of Dustin noisily shoving food into his face. El, who had been noticeably silent after her outburst, looked over at Lucas, eyes wounded.

“Do you really think I *stole* it? That I’m... dealing drugs?”

The dark-skinned boy shifted uncomfortably but didn’t quite backdown.

“Well... I don’t know, El!” he grew more irritated, “you haven’t exactly offered up an explanation, and you didn’t even tell us in the first place!”

“I... I gave you money for the hotel,” she protested weakly, knowing he was right.

“Yeah, but that was like... forty bucks. This is... way more,” he crossed his arms, “I mean, normal people don’t just haul around that much money, especially not runaways! What am I supposed to assume?!”

“It’s mine, I sang for it,” she looked unsettled, her eyes begging him to believe her, “*I promise .*”

That word set him off.

“And that’s the other thing! I don’t even know if I can trust you, El! Don’t you understand that?! You’ve done nothing but be all secretive since we met you!”

He was growing more and more agitated as he spoke.

“And then you say you’ll sing with us at this party, which, by the way, is kind of a big deal, and you just... run off! To lock yourself in the bathroom and scare the *shit* out of us without even...” he trailed off and El felt something in her chest clench as she realized he’d been genuinely worried about her, “and you just, you *don’t do that!* You don’t abandon your bandmates. You don’t abandon your *friends*.” He deflated a bit. “If something’s wrong you can tell us, okay? We’ll try and help you and figure it out. But you can’t be selfish like that if you want us to *trust* you.”

The real source of the argument was out and it fell silent as El processed what he’d said. He was right, she realized, about what she’d done. She’d let her emotions get the better of her and abandoned them after they’d been nice enough to let her ride with them and sleep with them, and most importantly, *sing* with them, something she was realizing was a big deal. Running off had scared them. She could still hear the concern in Mike’s voice as he asked if she was hurt through the bathroom door. They all cared about her now and she’d thrown it back into their faces because she’d let the fear of her past take over. Something close to nausea bubbled in her stomach.

“I’m sorry,” it was barely a whisper, “I... I’m so sorry. You’re right. That was wrong.” Another realization dawned, that the whole situation afterwards was her fault too. “If I hadn’t done that, Troy wouldn’t have cornered Will and...”

The guilt broke over her and she hung her head ashamedly, feeling her eyes burn with tears. Mike reached under the table to give her hand a reassuring squeeze, but she pulled away, not believing she deserved his kindness after what she’d done. *Maybe I should leave now*, she thought, *before I do any more damage*.

From across the table there came a drawn-out sigh.

“I’m sorry too,” Lucas shrugged.

She looked up, wiping at the tears on her cheeks, taken aback by his unexpected apology.

“What I said about you being a drug lord and a hobo...” she frowned at his confession—she hadn’t heard the last one—as he continued, “that wasn’t true, I was just... I know I’m a dick sometimes, it’s an automatic reaction. And I’m sorry. But if you really want to be part of this, like you keep saying you do and acting like you do, then you need to think about us and not just run off! We’re your friends now and *friends don’t lie*, we talk to each other when something is wrong. Okay?”

He let that sink in, the sincere offer of friendship and what it meant. He wanted her to understand, to really know that she was on a path to becoming something permanent in their lives but only if she could let herself open up more and put their needs first. She bit her lip and nodded, knowing that while she may not allow herself to be permanent, she was going to commit herself entirely to helping them while she could. They were her friends now. For real.

Lucas spat on his hand and held it out to her. “I promise to be less of an asshole, okay?”

She glanced at his hand, trying to hide her disgust, but reached out and shook it anyways. This was too important to suddenly be squeamish.

“I promise... to be less selfish,” she said as they shook.

More than anything she wanted to promise to be honest, to tell them the truth about who she was and where she got the money and why she had run away. But she couldn’t risk it. If Papa had sent people after her, like she knew he must have, then they might... try to take her back. And someone might get hurt again.

An image of a friendly, bearded smile came to her mind, then the same smile twisted into a pained grimace, the blood sticky on her palms as she screamed.

She shuddered and closed her eyes, trying to force the memory away.

“You alright, El?”

She opened her eyes at Mike’s question and quickly flashed him a pained smile, wiping her spit-covered hand on her jacket.

“Just gross,” she tried to laugh.

“What, spit grosses you out but not this shitty restaurant?” Dustin snorted.

She frowned, offended, and then looked around the greasy waffle hovel with adoring eyes. “I like it here. It’s...” she remembered Mike’s words, “trashy but... sacred.”

Her waffles were long cold, but she dug in anyways, realizing how hungry she was, and almost moaned out loud at how good it was. After the second bite she couldn’t stop and quickly ate half her plate, consuming the chocolate-y goodness like she hadn’t eaten anything so delicious in years. Which, up until the donuts earlier that day, she hadn’t.

She realized they were watching her again as she pigged out and flushed pink.

“So... the, ah, waffles are good?” Mike asked, trying to hide a grin at her embarrassment.

She wrinkled her nose at his sass and stabbed a bite on her fork, shoving it into his face, towards his mouth. He jerked his head back in surprise and glanced around the circle, face reddening at Lucas and Dustin’s sudden smug smiles. *Is she seriously trying to feed me right now?!*

“Uh, I-I’m okay...” he tried to protest but when her face fell he sighed and opened his mouth to accept the bite of waffle.

El perked back up and shoved the fork into his mouth a little too excitedly, nearly stabbing his tongue. She didn’t notice the others’ snickering at her antics, too focused on Mike’s face as he chewed the chocolate-y waffle. It was kinda greasy and would have been better

warm, but overall it was pretty pleasant and he hummed in approval as he swallowed.

“It’s... good,” he managed, noticing how El’s eyes glinted triumphantly.

“You should get some too, then.” She really did want them to eat something, glancing at Dustin and appreciating his enthusiasm. “I can buy food, so you should eat.”

“No, you can’t be spending your money on us, El, we’ll figure it out, okay?” Mike said as he turned to Dustin. “And you better figure out a way to pay for that because you’re not taking advantage of her like this.”

“Wha—oh come on, Mike, she offered!”

He felt a tug on his sleeve and looked over at El who was frowning at him. Apparently she was serious about using her money on them, and while he appreciated her generosity, the thought still unsettled him.

“He’s right,” she gestured toward her backpack again, “I’m buying food. So eat,” she flashed him a charming smile, “please?”

“It’s a pretty good deal, Mike,” Lucas added, apparently having already accepted her offer, “it’s not like she doesn’t have enough money to cover it,” a huge grin lit up his face, “and, I mean, since she’s going to be singing with us anyways it make sense for her to help out.”

El’s head snapped up from her food to look at him and her eyes started shining. Mike gave Lucas a hard stare, hoping he wasn’t joking because her disappointment would be unbearable, but his friend looked serious.

“Really?” she asked, visibly excited. “You want me to sing with you again?”

“Well yeah, I mean,” Lucas let a smile creep across his face, “you really do have a killer voice, Mike was right about that. I think... you’d really add to our sound.” He glanced around the table. “Is that cool with you guys?”

Mike and Dustin both nodded, extremely pleased, but they all realized that Will was absent again. Mike looked out the window, trying to see if their youngest friend was out there, and spotted the back of him sticking out from behind the van. It looked like there was someone else behind it too and Mike squinted trying to figure out who it was.

“Um, I’m *definitely* cool with it, but I’m going to go ask Will... I’m pretty sure he’ll be cool with it too...” He assured El. He slid out of the booth, wiping the table grease off his hands and onto his khaki shorts.

Flo came back as he walked away and he heard Lucas ordering food. His stomach rumbled and he realized that he was hungry, but it just felt wrong. She’d bought him food at Dunkin and he’d allowed it because she hadn’t let him protest, but something about letting her fund half of their trip rubbed him the wrong way. Just because she had the money didn’t mean they needed to take it, even if she was going to become part of the band.

A thrill of excitement ran through him at that thought, of her being more permanent. She’d never really said what her plans after this trip were, and he had a silent hope that maybe she’d come back to Indiana with them. He wasn’t sure of her exact situation with the mysterious, controlling Papa, but maybe Hawkins would be small enough and quite enough that she would want to call it home? If she was part of the band she’d almost have to, since the rest of them lived there and practiced there. And she *wanted* to be a part of it... right?

He shook himself out of it, feeling a bit creepy. He still didn’t know her super well, but the thought of never seeing her hazel-browns crinkle up in laughter again made his heart pang. Was it selfish to want her to play a part in his future? It made him weirdly anxious to think about it so he focused back on his task instead, pushing his way out of the dilapidated Waffle House and into the parking lot.

He noticed that Will seemed to be alone now, and then heard a car door slam and an engine rev as a car pulled out of the parking lot. Huh. Will was still skulking behind the back of the van, bent over a bit like he was holding his stomach.

“Will?” Mike called still at a distance, not wanting to startle him.

Will stood up and whipped around, seeming to shove something into the pocket of his denim shorts before giving Mike a very forced smile. The younger boy looked sweaty and had that weird green, nauseous aura that seemed to plague him the last couple of days. As Mike got closer he noticed that weird rotten egg smell, the same one he smelled earlier at the motel.

“Um, is everything okay, Will?” He tried not to wrinkle his nose at the smell.

“Yeah, uh, just had to get some fresh air,” Will smiled back. He looked terrible.

“Are you sure? You’ve looked sick since we left Indianapolis and you... you don’t smell good, man, didn’t you shower this morning?”

“It’s nothing, I’ve just...” he bit his lip, staring down at the ground, his hands fiddling with something in his pocket, “I’ve felt kind of sick, like maybe I’m coming down with a stomach bug or something. But you don’t have to worry, I’m sure I’m fine.”

That kind of made sense. It would definitely explain why he’d been so distant at every stop, if he had been trying to keep from infecting them too. But he just looked so... shitty.

“Maybe you should see a doctor? We could probably find one of those twenty-four hour clinics or something...” Mike suggested, visibly worried.

“Nah, I’m seventeen, remember? They’d have to ask my mom’s permission to treat me and if she gets any kind of call from a doctor she’ll freak out and come and get me or something.”

That was also a valid point. Joyce Byers was the epitome of a good mother in almost every way... but she was also painfully overprotective. After Jonathan left with Nancy and Steve, she’d become extra attached to Will, sometimes not allowing him to come to practices that ran too late and demanding regular phone calls. It was from a genuine place of love, and all the boys knew that, but it

didn't keep them from rolling their eyes when Will shrugged and told them he couldn't hang out some nights.

It had taken a helluva lot of convincing for her to allow him to come on this trip, and he had to check-in twice a day and send pictures of himself to her and she'd made his three friends swear on their Dungeons and Dragons board that if anything happened, they would immediately let her know. It was that promise that was causing Mike to sweat now. Clearly Will wasn't okay, but if it was just a stomach thing, he'd be fine soon enough, and the last thing any of them wanted was for Joyce to track them down before they'd even made it to Lincoln. Mike sighed.

"Alright, well, you should eat something. And stay hydrated. I guess El is buying us food now—"

"Oh, did you and Lucas agree on something for once?" Will managed a smirk.

"Har har. Yeah, well, sort of. Oh!" Mike remembered why he'd come out in the first place. "That's why I came to get you, um, Lucas was thinking El could actually like, join our band, since she wants to buy us food and hotels anyways." He sighed unhappily again.

"You... don't want her to? It's not like she doesn't have enough money..."

"Yeah but... it just doesn't feel right. It's like we're taking advantage of her or something, I dunno..." He shifted his feet uncomfortably.

Usually he could tell Will anything, the things that Dustin would mock him for or Lucas would think were dumb, but for some reason this was harder than usual. Will observed his friend, taking in the body language and unsaid words.

"You like her, don't you?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Oh, when did you figure that out? After I invited her with us or after I almost kissed her in the bathroom?"

Will looked shocked. "Wait, you almost did *what*?"

Mike's face heated up and he sputtered, remembering quite suddenly that Will hadn't seen the near-disaster, that it had just been Dustin. He grabbed his head and groaned, tugging at his hair in frustration

"N-Nothing, I didn't... I don't want to talk about it."

His tone was pleading and Will sighed quietly, knowing better than to push it. He shifted back and forth on his feet, wanting to keep his friend talking. Clearly he needed to talk about it, even if he didn't realize it.

"But... I'm right," he said and Mike managed to make himself look up, still embarrassed, "you do like her. Like *really* like her. Like, you're not just being the nice guy as usual... you actually think she could be something."

Will could always read him like a Tolkien novel and Mike jiggled his leg nervously before deflating. There wasn't any point in hiding it now.

"I think... I've just never met anyone like her, you know?" He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared down at the remains of a moldy waffle, covered in parking lot dirt. "When she sings it's like... it's like I could just sit there forever and listen and be happy," he was blushing brightly, the red creeping up his face as he avoided eye contact. "And there's this thing how normal stuff is kind of new to her," he risked a glance at Will, "did you know she'd never been to a party before? Like the kind we just went to? And she hadn't eaten a donut since she was like six," he smiled at the memory, "and it was the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen, she couldn't get enough, I ended up giving her the rest of mine too..."

Will was watching his tall friend attentively, eyes glimmering. Mike kept going, like his words were an avalanche that he couldn't stop if he tried.

"And it's crazy, because I really think whoever was in charge of her actually kept her prisoner for like... ten fucking years! But she's still so amazed by these little things and hasn't complained about... anything, really, even when Lucas was being a total dick to her. And when I first saw her at that shitty bar she looked lost and scared, like

Nancy did y'know," he wiped his nose casually, "but she doesn't seem super pissed off like Nancy was. She's just so happy to be away from that... prison, and to be with us and she keeps smiling..." he sighed, looking almost dreamy, "Will, when she smiles at me it's like... it's like when I finish writing a song and it's actually *good*, and I know it could *be* something. It's like I finally understand myself, even if it's just for a second."

He stopped to take a breath, ears flaming from the deluge of emotions. That was more than he'd meant to say but at least he was in safe company. Will was nodding slowly, looking contemplative.

"That's pretty cool, Mike," he smiled much more genuinely, "honestly, I think she kind of likes you too."

Mike stood up straighter. "Wait, did she tell you that or something?"

"Um, no, I haven't really talked to her much but," Will shrugged, then gave his friend an impish smirk, "I think it's kind of obvious. She seems to trust you the most, I mean like earlier in the bathroom after the head-shaving thing? It wasn't until you said she was still pretty that she suddenly felt a lot better..."

"Oh," Mike swallowed, suddenly speechless, heart pounding like a jackhammer, "well, um, that's... cool."

Will let Mike process what he'd said. He was happy for his awkward friend. Girls had never really been an easy topic for Mike, and the few crushes he'd had back in school always stayed just that. None of them had really tried except for Dustin, but it was mostly talk up until this Max girl who he was obsessively texting between bites back inside the restaurant.

Mike was *trying* to process Will's words but he was struggling. He couldn't stop sweating at the thought of going back inside and scooting into the booth next to El. Or being around El. Or thinking about her at all. *Is it really possible? Could she like me?* He dared to glance at the window where they were sitting.

Lucas and Dustin appeared to be boisterously singing something, complete with choreographed hand movements and matching head

swaying while El laughed, her mouth full of chocolate chip waffle. The two boys finished their song and El applauded. He wondered what they had been singing, feeling like he was missing out, and Will noticed.

“Hey, why don’t we head back in, I’m feeling better now,” he suggested.

Mike nodded and they both started walking towards the door but as he glanced over at Will he remembered what he’d seen.

“Was there someone out here with you earlier? I thought I saw someone behind the van with you.”

Will froze. “Um, well, yeah...” he licked his lips nervously, “it was just... some guy I was texting.”

Mike’s eyebrows flew up his forehead, but then a sly smile slid across his face.

“Oh, really? Just *some* guy, huh?”

“Oh my god, Mike, don’t do that,” Will laughed nervously, still a bit on edge, “it was just a quick meet-up, I’ll probably never see him again.”

“Why not? Not your type?”

“Sure,” he rolled his eyes, “he wasn’t my type. Because I obviously have a type.”

“Well it’s not like I would know! You’ve never really talked about it before...”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Do you want me to talk about it?”

They were almost to the door but Mike paused as he set his hand on the handle, looking back at his friend.

“I mean... if you want to, yeah,” he furrowed his brow, “you can talk to me about that stuff too, you know. I won’t get weirded out or... whatever. You can talk to me about... well, anything. You know that

right?” He blinked, face serious.

“Yeah, no, I do...” Will still seemed hesitant, but he was more unsure of himself than Mike, “if something happens, I’ll let you know first, okay?”

“Deal,” Mike agreed, slugging the other boy on the shoulder good-naturedly before opening the door and heading back inside.

When they got back to the table, Lucas and Dustin were trying to dance like the Village People, loudly singing, “*It’s fun to stay at the Y. M. C. A.!*” and El was laughing again, looking like she was about to choke on her waffle. When Lucas saw Mike and Will he immediately stopped, but Dustin kept going, get more and more into it as he bobbed his head to the imaginary music. Lucas elbowed him roughly.

“*Young man, there’s no need* —Ow, Lucas! What are you—oh,” he waved at them, “hey guys. What took you so long?”

“They did Bohemian Rhapsody!” El interjected, swallowing the last bite of her waffle, “It was awesome!”

Mike felt suddenly speechless as she turned her gaze on him, swallowing heavily. *Breathe, Wheeler, it’s just El. She’s cool, remember?* He tried to smile but ended up looking constipated.

“Ha, yeah, too bad we missed it.”

Will pushed him towards the booth and he almost fell into the seat, shooting a glare over his shoulder as he scooted in towards her. He glanced around the table nervously, hoping his stupid awkwardness wouldn’t be too obvious. Lucas was too busy eating his fresh plate of gravy-covered hash browns to notice and Dustin was focused back on Will. Apparently the clowning and singing was reserved only for El’s eyes.

“So did you say yes?” Dustin asked.

Will blinked, confused. “Yes to what?”

“To letting El join the band!”

“She’s joining the band?”

“That’s why Mike went to get you...” Lucas rolled his eyes, “apparently he didn’t tell you that though.”

Mike looked embarrassed. “I forgot, sorry.”

He wasn’t going to admit what they’d actually been talking about, eyes glancing around as he tried desperately to not look at El. His face started reddening again and Will quickly filled the silence.

“Well I’m okay with it,” he leaned forward so he could peek past Mike and smile at her, “I think that’d be really cool. I didn’t love singing backup anyways.”

Mike was nervously tapping on the table, finally turning to face El, trying to squelch the feeling that rose in his stomach that insisted he should vomit. She shifted to look at him too and some of the nervousness faded away as she smiled brightly. She was still the same, blinking her hazel-browns and looking excited, and he realized he was psyching himself out. *What was I afraid of again?*

“Welcome to Hawkins Middle AV Club!” He managed, his smile much less forced.

She wrinkled her nose, eyebrows pulling together at his words.

“Wait... is that the name of the band?” she asked.

“Well... yeah.” He was surprised. “Didn’t you know that? I said it at Mirkwood.”

“No. I must have missed it...” she looked even more confused, “why are you called that?”

“Ha!” Lucas started cackling.

Mike frowned, trying to look hurt, “...I picked the name. Sort of. We’re all nerds and the 80s are big right now so we thought we’d kind of bank on the nostalgia factor...”

“It’s just... so long. Why not just AV Club?”

Lucas hooted again.

“I told you, Mike! I *told* you!” He looked triumphantly around the table, claiming his victory. “We should just be The AV Club.”

“Mmm... no, no ‘the’, just AV Club,” El put in, “adding a ‘the’ sounds kind of... pretentious.”

Lucas sputtered, “What—no, I mean, come on! It makes it more official, like, imagine someone saying, ‘I love The AV Club’ versus just, ‘Yeah, AV Club is great’ it sounds...” he wrinkled his brow in thought, “actually, you’re kind of right... it’s better without the ‘the’.”

“Otherwise it sounds too much like you’re trying to rip off The Breakfast Club,” she added.

“Shit, she’s right, Mike, we gotta change it.” Lucas looked borderline shaken.

El hadn’t thought it was that big of a deal but apparently this had been a hot topic. She’d only been honest, their original name was a mouthful, but Mike looked like a puppy she’d swatted with a newspaper and she suddenly felt bad.

“I mean, it’s your band, you don’t have to change it.”

He sighed but shook his head. He’d only fought against it because he was sick of Lucas always being right, but she’d proved that they were both wrong and he felt better about surrendering to her logic than Lucas’s stubbornness.

“No... you’re right, it really is better and hey,” he smiled, letting the slight disappointment melt away, “it’s your band too now, right?”

He had the sudden urge to grab her hand again under the table, but pushed the thought away, knowing it was stupid and awkward. She’d already pulled away once, earlier, and he didn’t want to be too forward. But he wanted to make sure she understood that she was one of them now, and settled on giving her a friendly nudge with his elbow. Her eyes still looked sad, but she brightened them and nudged back, letting a small smile quirk her lips.

“I guess so.”

Flo came back again just then and Mike finally gave in to his hunger and ordered some plain waffles, making sure Will did the same. He reminded himself to keep a closer eye on his friend, in case whatever bug he had didn’t go away. By the time their food arrived, El was yawning, looking visibly tired and he glanced at his watch. It was almost two in the morning and he was starting to feel tired too, their short but energetic performance at the party had drained him.

Lucas noticed too and spied a Super 8 hotel on the other side of the overpass.

“So... El,” he started and she perked up a bit at the sound of her name, “since you have a fuckton of money and want to pay for hotels, is it cool if we upgrade just a tiny bit?” He pointed out the window. “I mean, it’s no Four Seasons but it doesn’t look like it was built before my parents were born so...”

El shrugged casually, staring out the window and picking at the hem on her skirt. Hotels were kind of her thing and his mention of the posh resort chain made her reply without thinking.

“Four Seasons are overrated.” She frowned as she realized what she’d just said. “Um, not that it matters. We can stay there,” she pointed towards the Super 8.

“Wait, you’ve stayed at a Four Seasons before?” Lucas asked, looking surprised.

“Yeah, a few times...” she looked distressed and Mike noticed, cutting in before Lucas could ask more.

“That’s cool, El, but I’m gonna fall asleep on this gross table if we don’t leave soon,” he gave Lucas a look, “can we go now?”

Lucas was still giving her a curious stare but he nodded agreeingly and they paid, making sure to leave Flo a nice big tip, and headed out. El glanced over her shoulder at the Waffle House longingly as they walked back to the van and Dustin noticed.

“Don’t worry, El,” he grinned, “we can always stop in again

tomorrow for breakfast.”

It was a joke but her face lit up brighter than the neon yellow sign.

“Really?!”

She was beaming and Will shook his head at Dustin with a sigh. They didn’t actually want to come back but it seemed like now they would have no choice. Mike shook his head too but smiled, deciding that her unbridled love for the sticky-floored waffle establishment was kind of cute.

“I guess we’ll have to now,” he replied, feeling his heart flutter as she turned her smile towards him, her eyes dancing as they met his.

“Promise?” she asked.

“Promise,” he replied without hesitating, sticking out his hand to make the deal official.

As she tucked her band aid-covered into his and shook, he felt warmth flow up his arm and to his heart, thinking about Will’s words from earlier. *Could she really like me?*

Maybe he’d find out in the morning over another plate of greasy waffles.

Notes for the Chapter:

okay so i've never actually been to waffle house and i'm sure that there are some very nice ones, but we're just going to say that this one is... not so nice. so of course el loves it. i was trying to solve the problem of eggos not really working in a road trip setting, so this was me trying to pull waffles into it because they are important!

i've been really stuck on chapter six, so i'm hoping this next week the inspiration kicks in and i can get caught up. wish me luck.

also, i'm not saying i would beg for comments... but

please, i love your feedback so much.

-g

5. Let Me Be The One To Save You

Notes for the Chapter:

hello all!

i'm terribly sorry about the long wait. my editor went out of town for about a week to try and get into film school and then i got stung by a wasp on my hand (i've never been stung before funnily enough) and couldn't type and well... it took a while and the chapter isn't as long as i was hoping to make up for it but i think it's still pretty good.

the good news is after deleting about twenty seven pages of garbage, chapter six is starting to actually come together and boy is it going to be fun! i hope. so with any luck i'll be updating more regularly again, but i can't promise anything.

again, sorry for the wait! feel free to berate me in the comments.

Tap tap tap!

Mike rolled over with a grunt and tugged at the sheets, which were being hogged by Lucas, wanting to wrap himself up in the covers and go back to sleep. The only sound was Dustin was snoring soundly from the other bed and Mike decided he'd imagined the knocking, tucking his face back into his pillow with a muffled sigh.

Tap tap tap!

“Mike, get the fucking door,” Lucas mumbled, his hand reaching over to shove the taller boy.

“No you,” he grumped back into his pillow.

Tap tap tap!

“You guys, it’s Will,” came through the door.

With a reluctant sigh Mike sat up, groggily glancing at the analog alarm clock that barely illuminated the nightstand between the two beds. 3:22 A.M. He'd barely been asleep for an hour. *Someone better be dying*, he grumbled to himself.

"Mike, um, it's El. She won't stop crying," Will's voice was barely audible but suddenly Mike was moving much faster, opening the door and then cringing at the harsh light from the hallway that spilled into the room.

"Shut the goddamn door!" Lucas yelped, almost drowned out by the deafening groan of protest that erupted from Dustin's bed.

Mike quickly stepped into the hallway and let the door shut behind him, still blinking to adjust his eyes. He realized he was only in his boxers and rubbed at his arms self-consciously, glancing up and down the deserted hall, hoping no one else showed up. Will was standing in front of the door of the room that he and El were sharing, looking as exhausted as Mike felt.

It had taken them less than half an hour to check into the Super 8 hotel, getting side-by-side rooms with two queen beds each, at El's request. It was fairly inexpensive and they had been too tired to protest when she'd insisted that they would all get to sleep in a bed that night. There had been a semi-awkward minute while figuring out who would sleep in what room, but Mike had volunteered Will to share with El again, and after giving his younger friend a pleading look, Will had shrugged and said, "Whatever, I just want to sleep. Like now."

It had taken them all even less time to crash, and while Mike wasn't too happy to be woken up, he was worried about what Will had said.

"El's... crying?" He asked, trying to wake up enough to understand what was going on.

Will shifted awkwardly, "Um, yeah, she was like, muttering in her sleep and then she sat up and started screaming," he tugged at his faded X-Men shirt, "I got up to try and calm her down but she started crying and I couldn't get her to stop... I didn't know what to do."

“She had a nightmare?” Mike guessed.

“I think so, um,” Will looked immensely uncomfortable and lowered his voice. “She kept begging someone to stop and then she started apologizing over and over and... she kept talking about her dad.”

“Her dad?”

“Yeah, um, she called him Papa?”

Mike felt his blood turn to ice. He didn’t know a lot about her captor, the one she called Papa, but from what she’d said so far he got the impression he didn’t want to meet him. *What kind of person takes over a kid’s life and scares them so bad they have nightmares?* He wondered, starting to feel pissed. Will was still watching him with a curious expression, and Mike sighed, deciding his friend deserved some of the truth.

“That’s not her dad, at least not biologically. She said her parents were killed by a drunk driver when she was like six?” He tried to remember what she’d told him. “And then her aunt had her but she killed herself two years later and then she said... Papa took care of her? I still don’t know what he was to her... other than a fucking asshole.”

Will’s eyebrows arched up in surprise and Mike explained.

“He had her on a diet and apparently an exercise program, she couldn’t even eat *donuts*. In case she got *fat*.” He spat out the words. “He kept her totally isolated too, she wasn’t allowed to go out like... at all! He moved her around so much she didn’t have friends. She’s lived in hotels her whole life... it’s like he completely controlled everything she did.” His outrage turned to saddened repulsion and he shook his head like he couldn’t even believe what he was saying. “All so he could make her sing what he wanted. Who *does* that? To a *kid*?”

He was surprised by the harshness in his own voice, suddenly realizing that her whole situation pissed him the fuck off. If he ever did meet “Papa” he wasn’t going to run away... he was going to punch his fucking lights out. Or at least try. El deserved that much.

“He made her sing?” Will asked, breaking Mike from his haze of rage.

“Um... yeah, that’s what she said.”

“Was she famous or something? Is that how she got all that money?”

Mike furrowed his brow. “I don’t think so, have you ever heard of any musicians named Eleven?”

“Her name is *Eleven*? You said it was just El.”

“Well, she asked to be call El. Short for Eleven,” he frowned, “I don’t... I don’t know her last name actually. I didn’t ask. But still, have you heard of any famous Elevens?”

Will scrunched his brow, like he was thinking really hard.

“Well,” he counted on his hands, “there’s Apollo 11, Sodium is the eleventh element, a hendecagon has eleven sides, Ocean’s Eleven, Matt Smith was the eleventh Doctor of course and... didn’t Return of the King win eleven Oscars?”

“Yeah... I think it’s a Grateful Dead song too,” Mike replied, his fuzzy brain automatically checking for anything eleven-related.

“The Grateful Dead wrote a song about Return of the King?”

“No, a song called ‘the *Eleven*’.”

They blinked at each other and started laughing. They were both so tired they’d reverted to their true form, which was being massive nerds in every way possible. Sometimes Mike wondered if they would have been picked on worse if they hadn’t been in a band together, their one redeeming “cool” factor that somehow canceled out the fact that after practices they would play D&D and Magic the Gathering and Ocarina of Time until Mike’s mom yelled down the stairs that they needed to go home and sleep in their own beds.

There was a lull and behind him, through the door, Mike could hear pitiful whimpering and sobbing. Will turned towards the sound before shooting Mike another tired look.

"See? I don't... I didn't know what to do."

Mike reached for the handle and jiggled it, his groggy brain realizing it was, of course, locked. Will silently pulled out his keycard and slid it into reader, opening the door as the light switched to green, and they both quietly moved in. Mike wanted to offer his sleeping place in the other room to Will, but he realized he hadn't grabbed a keycard and was locked out, since neither Lucas nor Dustin were about to get out of bed to let them in. There was another pitiful whimper and he stopped caring about it as he stepped further into the dark room.

Will had turned on one of the small lamps next to his bed, lightly illuminating the room and the sobbing lump curled up on the other bed, buried under the covers. The younger boy sighed before climbing back into his own bed, grabbing his earbuds and phone and pointedly rolling over in an attempt to give Mike some privacy to deal with the crying girl. He switched off the lamp, hoping to get some sleep despite the crisis.

Mike blinked his eyes to get used to the darkness again, walking closer to El's bed and clearing his throat awkwardly.

"El?" he asked, reaching forward to tug gently at the blankets. "Hey, are you okay?"

It was a stupid question, really, but she sat up and peeked out from under the covers, still holding the sheets tightly around herself. Her eyes glinted in the dark, cheeks stained with tears, and she could only make herself whimper again as an answer. She looked afraid, the terror visible even in the near-dark, and Mike instinctively moved closer, sitting on the edge of the bed in front of her, wanting to wrap his arms around her trembling form.

After Nancy had left, each of his family members had responded differently. His mom became more OCD, obsessing over little things that didn't matter like grout stains and lopsided casseroles. Mike had become more angry, unable to understand why she'd just abandon them all. His dad had seem unaffected at first, and it took Mike a few months to notice that the jabs at his songwriting and guitar playing had disappeared and the way that Ted Wheeler could sometimes be

seen standing in front of the fireplace, staring at the mantelpiece where their family portrait was nestled next to Nancy's senior photo. The worst blow had been to Holly, who'd been struck with excessive, illogical fear.

She'd only been eight, almost nine, at the time, but she admired both of her older siblings fiercely, even though she'd always been closer to Mike. A few nights after Nancy disappeared, Holly had appeared in his doorway, whispering, "Mikey? Are you awake?", her voice thick with tears. He'd woken up, of course, and tried to put her back to bed, but not before holding his little sister as she cried, asking him, "Why did she leave? Are you going to leave too? Please don't leave, Mikey, I promise not to bug you anymore if you don't leave". He'd tried to assure her that he wouldn't, that there wasn't any reason for him to leave, but the fear still haunted her eyes and kept her coming back to his room in the early morning hours. It made him angrier at his older sister, for being so selfish and not thinking about who she was leaving behind.

After the first year of Nancy's absence passed, the sleepless nights seemed to lessen, but the two youngest Wheeler siblings made an unspoken pact to always be there for each other, in the way their older sister wasn't.

El's terrified face looked so much like Holly's and before he really thought about it Mike scooted closer, reaching forward to pull her to him. She went easily, like it had been the thing she'd needed, and he wrapped her in his arms as she started sobbing heavily into the crook of his neck, her arms crushed against his chest. Her breath was hot on his skin as she hiccuped and gasped, tears dripping onto his bare shoulder. He was suddenly extra glad she'd shaved her head, knowing he might have suffocated on her hair if it had still clouded around her.

"I-I'm s-s-sorry," she sobbed, her voice shaking so badly she could barely form sentences, "I'm s-so s-sorry."

"Shhh, it's okay," he soothed, curious as to what she was apologizing for but knowing this wasn't the time or place to ask.

It took a few more minutes and he started rocking her gently without

really realizing it. That had always helped Holly and it was just instinctual now. It worked and after she'd started to calm he lessened his grip, realizing maybe he'd overstepped some invisible boundary that separated friend from something more. Not that he wouldn't be okay with it but he still wasn't sure about her.

She pulled back, reaching down to grab the sheet and wipe at her snot-covered face, suddenly embarrassed. It was quiet, other than the tinny sound of music from Will's earbuds as he breathed loudly, sound asleep.

"Um, feel better?" Mike asked lamely, unsure of what to do. He felt awkward, like he was too close again.

"S-Sorry," she whispered, "you didn't have to... do that."

She sounded tired and apologetic and grateful all at once, eyes blinking softly up at him. His mouth went dry as she gently reached out with the sheet and wiped off the tears and snot she had left on his shoulder. He felt goosebumps cover his arms.

"It's, um, it's okay, really. My little sister... she used to wake me up at night a lot, so I'm kind of used to it."

"You have a sister?" She seemed surprised, and he realized he hadn't mentioned it.

"Yeah, two actually. Holly is the little one, um, and Nancy is older than me. I'm the lucky middle child," he joked. She smiled weakly and he tried to divert from his lame attempt at humor. "Um, what about you? Any siblings?" He knew she hadn't mentioned any, but figured it was a relevant question.

"No. Just me," she replied, voice full of obvious longing.

It was quiet again as she stared at him in the dark. He wasn't wearing a shirt and she admired his broad shoulders, dappled with the same freckles that were scattered across his nose and cheeks. She hadn't really looked at him before, or at least not fully like she was now. At the bar she'd noticed the way his dark eyes seemed lit up from behind, with kindness and an understanding intelligence that made

him easy to trust. But now she noticed the strong jawline and high cheekbones, the way the bit of silvery light reflected off of his inky hair, and realized that he was... attractive? She blinked, unfamiliar with the weird churning in her stomach that was different from the butterflies she'd discovered before. She glanced at his lips without really thinking.

Mike had been watching her as she analyzed him, captivated by her silent expressions. She had an incredibly expressive face, he'd noticed, and it made her extremely entertaining to watch, whether she was trying waffles for the first time or just staring out a car window. He saw the way she glanced at his lips. His breath hitched and he felt himself leaning towards her.

"Mike, um," her voice almost surprised him, her eyes warm and soft.

"Yeah?"

"I'd be happy to have a brother like you."

The word froze him in his tracks and he immediately backed way up. *Brother?! he practically screamed, she wants me to be her brother?!* It was like a falcon punch to the gut and he stood up, practically leaping off the bed, one of his hands reaching up to tug at his hair in silent frustration as he tried to figure out how to react to the situation.

El was startled by his reaction, unsure of what she'd said wrong. It was true. His little sister was super lucky to have someone as caring and as kind as Mike to take care of her when she was scared. She'd always longed for a sibling, a permanent friend she could awaken when the night got too dark or the fears of failing swarmed around her. Someone to just *be* there. It had been intended as a compliment, a bit of word vomit that had slipped out as she gazed into his eyes, but as he backed away she felt her stomach drop.

"M-Mike? Did I—"

"It's fine," he interrupted quickly, afraid she would say the word *brother* again. "I just... I should be going back to my room now, um, if you're okay." He remembered his lack of a keycard and frowned.

“Actually I can’t, shit...”

“You can stay here,” she offered, as if he really had a choice.

“Yeah, um, thanks. I’ll just squeeze in with Will...” he looked over at his friend, who was sprawled across most of his bed, wheezing softly in his sleep.

El observed the predicament and shifted in her own bed a bit, glancing over at the empty spot next to her.

“You can sleep with me,” she offered, before cracking a smile. “I mean, *next* to me.”

He paused, then let himself snort and shake his head. So she hadn’t forgotten his stupid bumble from the night before. Of course not. He groaned internally at her offer. Before he’d had to fight off the desire to sleep next to her, but right now it was the last thing he wanted to do. Curl up in a bed next to a cute girl. The same cute girl he’d nearly kissed twice now. The one who apparently thought of him as a *brother*.

Everything about the situation made his brain scream *no!* but there wasn’t really any other option, and he couldn’t refuse after her verbal jab.

“Ha ha, very funny,” he said sarcastically, dragging himself to the other side of the bed, feeling like he’d rather sleep on the floor but knowing it would probably hurt her feelings if he refused her offer. He hesitated. “You’re sure you’re okay with it?”

“I trust you,” she replied simply, unsure of why he was suddenly so distant.

He didn’t reply, still too butthurt to appreciate her answer, instead climbing into the bed and sliding under the sheets, rolling over so he was facing away from her. His entire body was tense and she tried to understand how he’d gone from being so gentle and holding her as she cried, to this stiff and unreadable stranger.

“Mike?” She sounded worried and he flipped over to face her with a sigh.

“Yeah?”

“Did... did I do something wrong?”

He realized he was being a dick and let out a long sigh as she blinked at him, her delicate eyebrows furrowed into worried lines. It wasn't her fault she was so damn attractive, that her voice was a captivating siren song, that she took his breath away with a single glance. And that she only liked him as brother. It wasn't fair to be an ass because she had emotions that didn't match his. He opened his mouth to answer her, but paused as he took in what she was wearing.

It was the old shirt he'd lent her to sleep in the night before, the Death Star on the front of it reflecting the pale light, the white letters beneath it spelling out “That's no moon!”. She was still wearing his clothes and some small part of him took comfort in that.

“You didn't... I'm just really tired, I'm sorry, El,” he apologized, trying to sound sincere. “Don't feel bad, I'll be less grouchy in the morning.”

She stared at him, trying to read the foreign emotion that troubled his face. Despite his protests she knew she'd done something wrong and she wished she could take it back. Anything to go back to the cozy warmth that he'd shared with her so far, instead of this frigid distance that now filled the space between them.

“Okay...” she sounded wounded but laid down, rolling onto her side away from him.

He stared at her back, feeling like a terrible person. His temper got the better of him sometimes, but it still wasn't an excuse to hurt her by being an asshole. It wasn't her fault that she didn't share his feelings. That she wanted him to be her brother. But it definitely stung, mostly because it meant that he really had imagined all those little moments and words and her singing to him. It had all, once again, been nothing but his wishful thinking. And that hurt.

He flopped onto his back, staring up at the ceiling and tugged at his pillow, trying to flatten it down a bit. Next to him, El's breathing had slowed and he hoped she'd fallen asleep. He hadn't been lying about

being exhausted, but his mind was racing too fast now to get any rest and he surrendered to the negativity that was surrounding him.

How could I be so stupid? he berated himself, why am I so desperate that I imagine that girls like me?

Every insecurity he'd ever felt surrounded him like a choking cloud of black smoke, reminding him how awkward and scrawny and undesirable he was. The word *brother* echoed in his mind like a taunt. It wasn't the first time he'd be disappointed by his feelings for a girl, but usually it was his own fault for not speaking up. This time it was just... just how it was. His heart felt sore and he sighed and scolded himself for getting too attached in the first place. The ache didn't go away, so he closed his eyes and pondered what his next step would be.

Obviously he couldn't keep trying. That would be rude and also creepy, and while he knew he was awkward he tried not to be *deliberately* weird. He opened his eyes to glance at her and let out a heavy sigh. She was starved for friendship, for companions and caring and the goodness in people he'd always been lucky enough to know. That had become clear almost as soon as he'd met her and she'd thanked him for the mere act of giving her a nickname. She just needed *friends* and he tried to stifle a groan at the battle that was raging in his brain.

Logic was telling him everything would be fine, to just be normal and friendly while they finished the trip. But some other weird part of him wanted to jump out a window instead of ever looking at her again, to keep that bit of ache in his chest from worsening. Pretending he was okay with it was going to be hard.

Next to him, El stirred, her legs twitching like she was dreaming of running, interrupting his painful thoughts. Then she shuddered violently, a strangled cry ripping from her throat, and he realized it was another nightmare.

"No, Papa, no," she begged, voice muffled by the pillow she was writhing against.

Mike turned onto his side and reached out, shaking her shoulder and

sitting himself up on his elbow at the same time. At his touch she yelped and flipped over to face him, eyes wild and afraid. She looked broken, like a wounded animal, and he felt his heart clench at the pure terror that radiated from her trembling form.

“Woah, hey, it’s just me again,” he pulled his hand back, not wanting to startle her further.

Her eyes filled with recognition, followed by tears of relief and he almost startled as she lunged towards him, shivering and trying to bury her face in his chest as the crying started all over again. He wrapped his arms around her with a sigh, letting her whimper and sob out the fear for a second time. Two nightmares in one night seemed a lot, even for someone with an abusive past. He wondered if something had triggered her that day, since she’d been fine the previous night at the shitty motel in Springfield. Maybe it was his fault, for making her talk about her past at Dunkin Donuts.

As they lay there, her hot tears soaking the cool sheets, he was struck with the sudden realization that *this* was what she needed. Someone to just be there, to help get rid of the fear. He was being selfish for wanting more from her when she truly did just need a brother, just like Holly had needed him. Her comment had hurt but he knew it was based in truth, in the desire to have someone there when she was afraid.

She was still crying, but more softly, and he looked down and exhaled heavily, steeling his will. If that was what she needed, if that was all that she wanted from him, then he was more than willing to be that place of comfort. It was the least he could do after all she’d been through. She deserved to know that there was good in the world.

“You’re okay,” he mumbled, letting his arms hold her a bit tighter.
“You’re safe.”

After a few more minutes of crying and hushed reassurances, she quieted, her face still pressed to his chest, and then he felt her breathing deepen. *Did she fall asleep?* He risked a glance down and saw that her eyes were indeed closed and she was out, face relaxed and damn-near peaceful. *Shit, she did.* His eyes lingered for a second

longer, wanting to drink in her features like cool water, but he jerked his head back up, trying to remember his new mindset. *Just be there, don't force your emotions. She's your friend*, he reminded himself. It wasn't going to be easy but he knew he could do it. He *had* to.

Despite the weird newness of the situation, it didn't take long after that for the tiredness to creep into his weary mind and his eyes drooped shut, letting the warmth on his chest and her quiet breathy snores lull him to a rather sudden sleep.

&&&

“—shouldn’t take a picture, you guys, that’s rude.”

“But no one will believe us if we don’t get proof, Will!”

“Who are you going to need to prove it to?”

The muted whispers woke El from the dream she’d been having about a waffle themed marching band, all of the instruments made out of yellow waffles and oozing sticky maple syrup. She realized her forehead was pressed against something warm, something breathing, and she flinched back, trying to get her bearings. Her head felt light and she reached up automatically to brush her hair out of her face, heart nearly stopping as her fingers touched nothing but fuzz.

The previous day’s happenings came back to her and she remembered the shopping trip, the house party, the buzzing razor sliding across her scalp, the smelly Waffle House, the paralyzing nightmares. And Mike’s warm arms, which were still wrapped around her now. She looked up at his face, still relaxed as he slept, feeling her heart flutter.

“Shit, I think she’s waking up, quick—” Dustin’s voice was accompanied by the sound of an electronic shutter clicking.

El blinked again and lifted her head up, realizing she had been using Mike’s bicep as a pillow, her forehead still warm from where it had

been pressed up against his bare chest. She sat up halfway, noticing how his other arm was thrown over her waist, keeping her legs tangled with his under the covers. Her movement caused him to stir with a huff and a groan, but she was too busy staring at the scene in front of her to notice.

Dustin and Lucas were standing at the end of the bed, seeming oddly excited, both looking like they had only recently woken up, still boxer-clad. Dustin's curls were flattened down on one side and there was a streak of dried drool on his chin but he was grinning widely, his phone in his hand. At her attempt to get up he chortled.

"Did you sleep okay, El?" he asked, sounding way too smug.

"Yeah, how did you sleep?" Lucas joined in, looking less suspicious than Dustin but still way too excited.

She blinked at them. "Um, fine, I guess."

They both started snickering and from the other bed Will sighed.

"Cut it out, you guys. I already told you, she had a nightmare and Mike came over to help her out," he glanced up from the text he was sending, "obviously I wouldn't have slept in here if anything else happened."

Next to her Mike sat up, pulling his arm from her waist so he could rub at his eyes, too groggy to notice what was going on or even where he was.

"Whashappening?" he muttered, before looking next to him and realizing he was tangled up with El. He startled violently backwards, feet getting twisted in the covers, and fell off the bed and onto the floor with a grunted, "oof!", taking all the blankets and sheets with him. Dustin started cackling.

"I know it's your first time waking up in a bed with a girl, but you don't have to shit your pants, Mike!" he said between bouts of laughter.

El scooted across the now bare mattress and looked down at him on the floor, brow furrowed. Did her breath stink or something? She

didn't think she was *that* repulsive. But then she remembered how close he'd been and felt her cheeks warm at the memory of being wrapped in his arms. It had been nice. More than nice. She'd felt... *safe*.

"Are you okay, Mike?" she asked quietly.

He managed to stand up, but realized he was wearing only his boxers and immediately grabbed the sheet and wrapped it around himself like a bizarre toga, looking frazzled. It had been dark last night, and he'd been too busy being concerned about her to be self-conscious, but now he felt every bit the awkward, scraggly nerd he knew his was. He looked over at his friends who were still snickering.

"Um, I'm fine. I was just surpris—" He caught sight of the phone in Dustin's hand and what was on the screen. "Wait, Dustin, did you take a *picture*!?" He crossed the room quickly, trying to snatch the chortling boy's phone from his hands. "Delete that! What the hell is your problem!?"

"Aw, come on, Mike, don't you want photographic evidence that you finally slept with a girl?"

Mike turned beet red, equal parts anger and embarrassment, risking a glance at El before turning his rage back on Dustin.

"No! No I don't! Because I'm not some perverted weirdo who has to document every single time I have any sort of interaction with a girl that could be considered sexual—" he turned to El, hands splayed in defense, "*not* that anything like that happened, I'm just saying," his heated glare turned back on Dustin, "you had better delete that or we're leaving you here in St. Louis you *asshole*."

With that he stormed from the room, swiping the keycard out of Lucas's hand and slamming the door behind him before anyone could react. It was quiet, all three boys too stunned to talk, and from her place on the bed El felt the need to explain.

"We didn't... I had a nightmare and he made me feel better," she said, breaking the silence. They turned to look at her and she tugged at her shirt, suddenly self-conscious. "I fell asleep on him like that,

but um, nothing... happened." She didn't get a lot of references and social cues but she wasn't so naive she didn't understand what they were trying to insinuate. "He just made me feel safe so I could sleep."

Will, who knew what had happened, gestured emphatically as if to say, "I told you so". He nodded towards the door with his chin, giving Dustin and Lucas both a pointed look.

"You guys should probably go and apologize. You actually pissed him off this time."

"It was Dustin's idea!" Lucas protested.

"Yeah, well, you didn't stop me!" Dustin shot back.

They bickered for a second before coming to the conclusion that while it had been Dustin's idea, they would both need to apologize in general to keep Mike from blowing another gasket. Will opened his mouth to tell them to get moving but before he could Dustin's phone vibrated and he let out an excited yelp as he checked it, eyes huge.

"Aw, fuck yes!" He turned to Lucas, doing a rather embarrassing victory dance, and grabbed his friend's shoulders excitedly. "She got us the gig! We've got the gig! We've got a gig!"

He was singing and dancing at the same time and El giggled despite her confusion, the goofy display definitely a sight to behold. Lucas pulled himself out of the happy boy's grip with an irritated scowl, looking as confused as El felt.

"What are you talking about you crazy weirdo?"

"WE GOT THE GIG."

"Yeah," he snorted, "I gathered that. Can you explain what that fucking means?"

Dustin finally stopped dancing, but he was still grinning wildly, holding up his phone where an open messages app could be seen.

"Remember that chick I was talking to? Max?" Dustin looked uncharacteristically flustered as he mentioned her name. "Well, turns

out her older brother works the local music scene and she sent him a video of us from the party last night because she liked us. Apparently one of the openers for a show he was organizing got sent to rehab or jail or some shit and he needed a last minute replacement.” His face was going to break he was smiling so widely. “And he said AV Club could do it.”

Lucas looked rightly shocked, like he was unable to process how their goofy drummer had just lined up a show bigger than anything they’d ever played by making out with some chick at a party. He swallowed thickly, trying to figure out what question to ask first.

“This was last night?”

Dustin nodded, still smiling brightly. “Yeah.”

“How come you didn’t tell us then?”

The drummer dimmed a bit. “Well, um, she told me about but she wasn’t sure if we would get it and I didn’t want to tell you if we didn’t ‘cause I knew you’d all be butthurt and I didn’t want to disappoint you guys...” he perked back up, holding his phone up again. “But we got it!”

That was fair and Lucas nodded. He was getting that shrewd gleam in his eyes like he always did when Mike pitched gigs to him. Mike, the unofficially-official leader, typically found them shows and negotiated prices and times all that, running it past Lucas who had the best judgement and was kind of the second-in-command. They always asked Dustin and Will too of course, but usually made the bigger decisions together, which their bandmates were typically fine with. It was how they’d operated for the past six years together and it was a pretty good system, so Dustin being the pitcher with the deets was definitely chucking a heavy duty wrench into the machine.

“Okay cool... what are we playing and where? Who are we opening for?”

“We’re going to be at some auditorium called The Quarry. It’s kinda grungy, but I told them we could play some harder stuff to match the sound,” he looked a bit nervous, “um, the band is called Junkyard

Bus. I think they're from the west coast, more garage post-punk or something.”

“I've never heard of them...” Lucas intoned, looking unimpressed.

“I have.”

The two boys turned and looked at El, who was still sitting on her bare mattress, tugging the oversized shirt she was wearing down her legs. She looked uncomfortable or embarrassed, like she was kind of hoping they would leave so she could put on some real clothes, but she didn't complain. Instead she explained.

“I used to go to LA a lot, and um, I like... harder music. They've been around for a few years... I always wanted to go to one of their shows,” she sighed so longingly they couldn't help but believe her. “They're supposed to be kind of crazy, lots of moshing and stuff, but really fun.”

“That's... definitely harder than we are,” Lucas looked torn, like he didn't want to give up the opportunity but at the same wasn't sure if they would be able to get a crowd going. “I mean, we could some 90's stuff, but the songs Mike wrote aren't... anywhere near post-hardcore. That's his sister.”

“I told Max we were a little more indie than punk but her brother—”

“Her brother?”

“Yeah, his name is Billy, he's like a coordinator or something—he said it would be fine so...” Dustin shrugged, “I told her yes, but if you absolutely hate it we could probably back out—”

“No...” Lucas wasn't ready to give up, “we should just ask Mike first.” He grinned. “I think he'll have to forgive us if we tell him you got us a huge show.”

Will, who had been silent so far, looked up from his phone.

“You guys should do that. I'd be okay with it, but Mike will want to know,” he advised. “El and I will get ready to go and you can text me whatever you decide.”

It was good plan, and the two left while El shot Will a grateful look. It had been too hot to wear the borrowed sweat pants, and Will had assured her that he didn't care if she walked around in her underwear as long as she didn't mind if he did the same, so she'd only worn the large shirt. It barely covered the tops of her thighs, falling off one of her shoulders, but it had ridden up and she felt uncomfortable knowing that all the boys now knew what color her underwear was.

She was more embarrassed about that than the whole sleeping with Mike thing. He had only been there to help her and she felt those tickly butterflies in her stomach again as she remembered his hushed words and gentle embrace. He'd been so kind and had taken care of her and that was what he got for it. *Why do the others make fun of him so much?* she wondered, the thought of his red face and angry voice making her flinch. *At least he wasn't mad at me...*

Shaking off the unpleasant thoughts, she decided to start getting ready instead, going over to her bag of clothes, pulling out the high-waisted denim skirt and one of her new black shirts, the one with the blood-spattered smiley face on the front, as well as some fresh undies and socks. She was really grateful to have new clothes, ones she got to pick. She stood up and looked back over at Will, remembering she'd wanted to thank him.

"Oh, um, thanks for helping last night."

He raised a brow. "I didn't do anything."

"You went and got Mike," she blinked gratefully, "that was doing something."

"I mean, he's got sisters, he knows what to do with crying girls," he shrugged, not wanting it to be a huge deal.

At that moment his phone buzzed and he looked down at it, eyebrows shooting up his forehead.

"Oh. That was fast. Actually... I'm not surprised," he said, almost more to himself than El, "I didn't think Mike would say no to that good of an offer. We'll just have to punch up our setlist..." his phone buzzed again and there was a pause as he read the new messages.

"Okay, I guess we're going meet up with Max, Dustin's friend, at some mall called the Chesterfield for lunch and to talk about it..." he looked up at El, "can you be ready to leave in like half an hour? I'll let you shower first."

"Sure."

He started texting back and she slid into the bathroom without another word, figuring she should hurry it up. It had a mirror on the back of the door and when she turned around after setting her clothes on the back of the toilet, her reflection scared herself. Walking towards it, she reached one hand out and set it on the cool glass, on her head.

The hair was really gone. She'd had it for six years, the ridiculously long golden tresses that usually just got in the way and drove her crazy because it was something she was never allowed to argue against. The only thing she'd hated more than being controlled, was not even being allowed to complain about it without being punished. She shuddered and closed her eyes, thinking about the dark closet and its stifling, claustrophobic blackness that made her feel like she was being swallowed alive.

She forced her eyes open, taking in her recently changed appearance and reaching up to touch the brown fuzz that now covered her head. She'd almost forgotten she was a brunette. In a way she would miss the long hair, only because it had been a wall against the world, her own personal curtain to keep her expressions hidden. Now everything was out in the open, where anyone could see and she tried to accept what she'd done with the buzzing razor in the bathroom the night before.

That decision had been driven by fear. The fear of being recognized, of being swarmed by people who didn't really know her, who only knew *Jane*. She closed her eyes and went back to the moment. Fear had started it, she realized, but a stronger fear had also kept that buzzing razor a quarter inch from her scalp. She'd heard Papa's voice, low in her ear, saying, "If you ever try to cut your hair again, I'll lock you up for *months*, Jane."

She'd hesitated, staring into her reflection in the mirror, seeing the

despair that filled her eyes. And then she'd thought of her new friends downstairs, joyfully playing the music that was thumping through the floor beneath her feet. She thought of the risk of being recognized. She thought of Mike—good, kind, gentle Mike who'd calmed her down so quickly and shared his clothes with her—lying on a hotel kitchen floor, blood pouring out of the wound in his stomach as the life drained from his eyes.

The razor buzzed along her scalp instantly, shearing the golden waves from her head as she ignored the consequences and the terror that tore through her. There were more important things than her fear. By the time she was done she'd barely recognized herself in the mirror. Not because of the lack of hair, but because of the absolute rebellion that filled her eyes like cold fire.

The door to the hotel room slammed shut outside of the bathroom and she jumped out of her thoughts, reaching over to turn on the water in the shower before stepping in. She poured the free hotel shampoo into her hand before lathering up her half inch of hair, reveling in the lack of tangles and snarls and *fear*.

A laugh bubbled out of her throat, filling the shower and her mind with a carefree joy. She was free, not just from the hair, but from the fear that had weighed her down for most of her life. Of what he would do if she refused to follow his rules. The invisible weight on her shoulders, the one that had been almost unbearable since she'd run was suddenly lifted, her heart a thousand times lighter.

Silent tears of relief mingled with the warm shower water that flowed down her face as she smiled, the laughter mixing with a strangled sob.

I did it, Papa, she thought triumphantly, heart pounding, *I defied you and I'm still here*.

Notes for the Chapter:

so i didn't originally tag this as a slow burn but i did now because it is the slowest burn omg. sorry about that if you're just here for the mileven but it will get better. i promise.

my goal overall is to finish this before stranger things 2 comes out. i'm not sure why... this is an au so it won't be too affected by the new season but honestly it's kind of just a deadline.

ALSO THAT NEW TRAILER THOUGH??? I SCREAMED SO MUCH AND CRIED A LITTLE BIT. wowza it was amazing. please scream with me about it and tell me what you thought!

-g